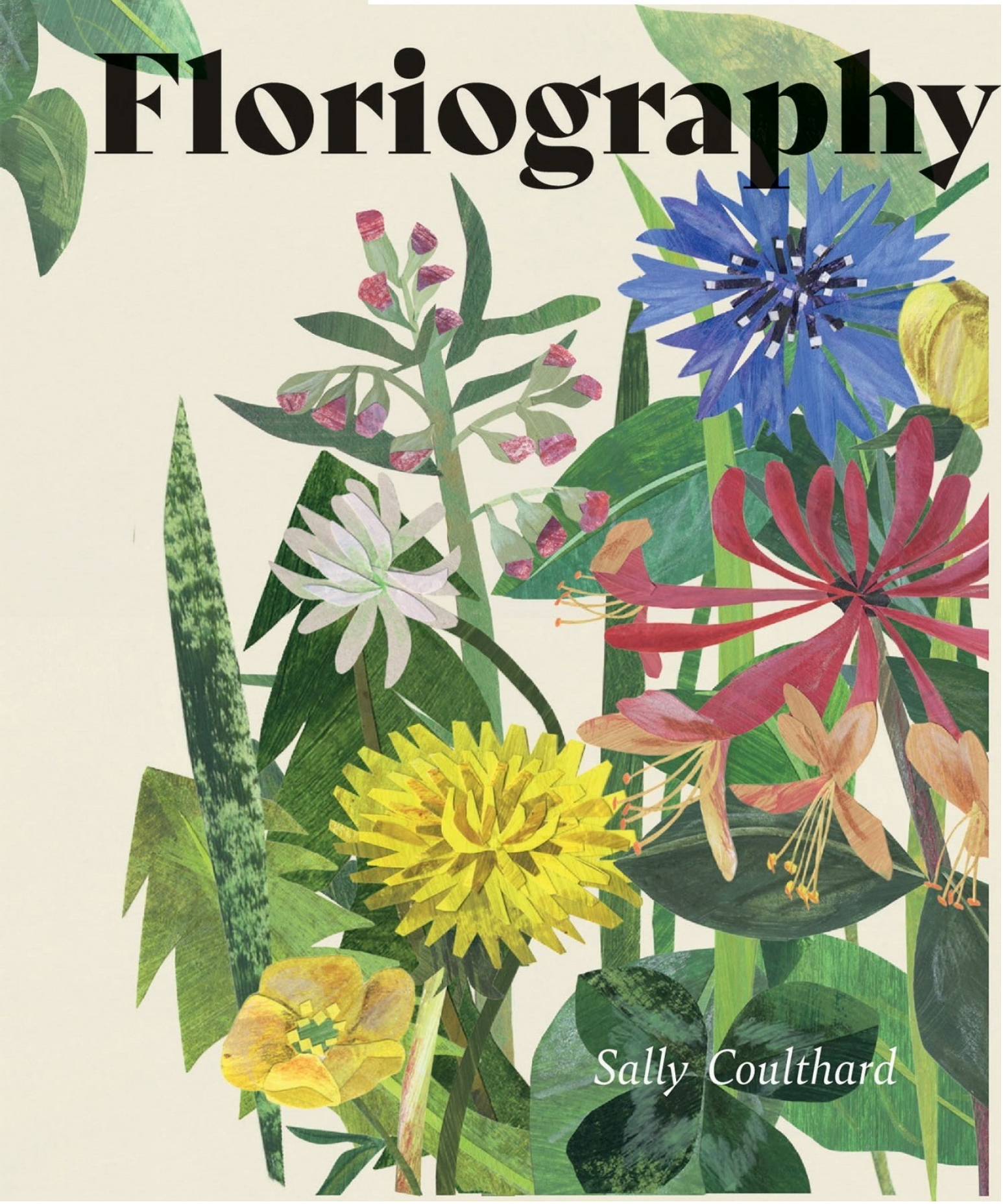
The Myths, Magic & Language of Flowers

Floriography



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The Myths, Magic& Language of Flowers

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QUADRILLE

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Acknowledgements

Life is a series of important milestones. Births, deaths, marriages, first loves, lost loves, illnesses and rites of passage – all of these we celebrate, or commiserate, with flowers.

We all speak the language of flowers, even if we're not aware of it. In the West, red roses declare passionate love, poppies remind us of fallen heroes, and daffodils burst with springtime optimism. White lilies offer condolence, daisies speak of childhood, and clover brings us a dash of good luck.

For thousands of years, people have attached meanings to the flowers they saw growing around them. The meanings often differed from culture to culture, but the significance of flowers was universal. Sometimes a flower became central to a culture's religion and ancient rites, such as the sunflower for the Aztecs. A flower may have been ascribed a human characteristic because of the way it grew – for instance, flowers that twist and squeeze around other plants are often associated with clinginess or intense passion, while 'shy' flowers such as violets, which only blossom for a brief period, are often linked to ideas about bashfulness or an untimely death. It's easy to imagine how flowers which showed any reliable healing properties – such as lavender, chamomile or echinacea – would be revered, while poisonous plants, such as oleander or foxglove, could incite both fear and great respect.

The folklore of flowers is an interesting subject to research. Many rural and everyday beliefs were never written down, and so to find the historical meanings of flowers we often have to turn to stories, classical mythology, religious texts and medieval medicinal books. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, for example, all drew heavily on floral symbolism. These historical works offer a fascinating window into the minds of our ancestors and how they viewed the world.

Flowers often gathered meanings when they resembled other things in nature or everyday objects. Orchids, for example, the bulbs of which look like male genitalia, have for most of human history been considered an

aphrodisiac. Primroses, which are a rich egg-yolk yellow and appear in springtime, were often part of superstitions about hens and egg-laying.

The buttoned-up Victorians seem to especially love giving flowers meanings. Restricted by what they could express openly in language, the Victorians found an outlet for their feelings in the coded symbolism of flowers or *floriography*. Giving someone a ‘talking bouquet’ turned into an artform – different flowers would be combined to spell out forbidden feelings or declarations of intention. Certain flowers, such as hydrangeas and its link to frigidity, also had the power to hurt or offend someone.

Few of us think about the meaning we attach to flowers. And yet, we often make choices about the flowers we plant, pick and give to others based on more than just colour or scent. Sometimes we are digging into an ancient past without realising it. That’s the myth, magic and language of flowers.

B11tt rc111>

The buttercups, the fitt(echildren's dower,
- Far brighter than thisgaudy mefon-flower!
ROBERT BROWNING: ***HOME-THOUGHTS***

FROM ABROAD **(1845)**

The English name ‘buttercup’ probably originates from the idea that these blousy, golden flowers, falsely believed to be grazed by cows, gave milk its creamy colour; Germans traditionally also call them *Butterblumen*, the Dutch *boterbloemen* and the Swedes *smörblommor*. In Ireland, buttercups were a key flower in May Day celebrations – by spreading the yellow blooms in and around the house, it was thought witches and bad fairies would be prevented from stealing the milk or butter. Children today still play the time-honoured game of holding a buttercup underneath a playmate’s chin to see if they like butter.

The Latin name for buttercup, *ranunculus*, means ‘little frog’, from their propensity to grow near water, but regional versions of buttercup are a delight, from ‘baffiners’ to ‘butterflowers’, ‘king’s knob’ to ‘polts’. Shakespeare called them ‘cuckoo-buds’ while in English rural slang they were often referred to as ‘crazies’, both of which refer to an ancient folk belief that buttercups caused insanity; Joseph Wright’s *The English Dialect Dictionary* (1898) notes: ‘*It would appear that this meadow plant is considered an “insane herb” by country people for I heard lately… that the smell of the flowers was considered to produce madness*.’

Buttercups are actually toxic to both humans and livestock if eaten. Applied topically, buttercups can also cause blistering, a fact that wasn’t lost on early physicians, who relished any opportunity to ‘draw out’ illness through the skin. Nicholas Culpeper, writing in the mid 1600s, enthused: ‘*This fiery and hot-spirited herb of Mars is no way fit to be given inwardly, but an ointment of the leaves or flowers will draw a blister, and may be so fitly applied to the nape of the neck to draw back rheum from the eyes*.’ An 1837 copy of *The Lancet* even claims that the buttercup is so good at creating skin sores that ‘*it has been used by beggars to excite the compassionate assistance of the benevolent, and even the medical man has sometimes been deceived*.’

Some varieties of buttercup are more toxic than others. The *Ranunculus thora* was said to have been used by alpine hunters to envenom their arrows. In Sardinia the *Ranunculus sardous* or ‘hairy buttercup’ may have given rise to the phrase ‘sardonic grin’ – in pre-Roman times, historical sources suggest that Sardinians executed criminals and elderly people who couldn’t take care of themselves; before being beaten to death or pushed off a high rock, the victims would be ‘helped along’ with an intoxicating buttercup drink that

had the unusual side-effect of making their facial muscles contract, forcing them to smile.

Pri111ros

Abrooch she bore upon her lower
collar Asbroad as isthe boss of
abuckef er. Her shoes were faced on
her (egges high.
She was a primerofe,a piggy's-eye

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: *THE MILLER'STALE* (14THCENTURY)

When the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser wrote the lines: '*Mine was the Primrose in the lowly shade…Oh! That so fair a flower so soon should fade, And through untimely tempest fade away*', his audience would have known he was talking about a young woman. The primrose is one of the first flowers of spring and, as such, has long been associated with new beginnings, young love and fresh-faced female sexuality. Chaucer, in *The Miller's Tale*, also describes the attractive, long-legged young wife of the old carpenter as a *primerole* (primrose), leaving his readers in no doubt of her youthful charms. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), Hermia confides to her friend Helena:

And in the wood where often you and I
Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie,
Emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,
There my Lysander and myself shall meet.

The 'primrose beds' symbolised the intimate friendship of two young women, but also the passion of Hermia meeting her lover, Lysander. The language of the primrose carried through into Victorian times, the flower becoming shorthand for youth and first love.

Primroses, with their spring significance and rich, eggy yellow petals, also attracted folk superstitions about hens. 'Sympathetic' magic or superstitions – which are also called imitative beliefs – were a kind of magic where things that *looked* like each other (or corresponded in some way) could affect each other. The primrose, a yellow flower that arrived in springtime, became linked to ideas about eggs and spring chickens. It was unlucky to pick primroses and bring them into the house unless you picked thirteen or more. The idea was the amount of primroses you picked would dictate how many eggs a hen would hatch. Thirteen was a significant number – not only was it thought to be the maximum number of eggs a broody hen could sit on and hatch comfortably, but it's also traditionally an unlucky number in both Christian and Norse mythology.

Daisy

The daisie, or els theeye of
theday, The empress and floure of
floures all

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: *THE LEGEND OFGOOD WOMEN* (14rHCENTURY)

Of all the English meadow flowers Chaucer could have chosen from, he picked the daisy as his favourite. In his poem, *The Legend of Good Women*, he devotes over fifty lines of glowing praise to this tiny field flower; it's such a cheerful, unabashed dedication – '*Of all the floures in the mede, Than love I most these*', he writes with joy, '*Whan it up riseth early by the morrow That blissful sight softeneth all my sorrow*.'

The word 'daisy' comes from the Old English *dæges eage* (day's eye), probably referring to the flower's habit of closing up its petals at dusk and opening them again in the morning. One of the earliest mentions of the daisy comes from the beginning of the 14th century and celebrates the flower as a sign of forthcoming spring.

In most literature and folklore, daises are the symbol of childhood innocence and rebirth. Victorian writers suggested the link came from an old Celtic myth that babies who died soon after birth were turned into daises to bring solace to bereaved parents, but the fact that the daisy's arrival coincides with the return of spring must have helped define its associations – winter wasn't over until, traditionally, you could step on seven daises at once. It was also the most popular choice of flower for love divinations (chants such as 'He loves me, he loves me not') and childhood games of daisy-chains. In American folk tradition, a girl would throw a handful of yellow daisy centres into the air, the number she caught determined how many children she'd have.

Daisies were a popular ingredient in traditional remedies. In John Gerard's late 16th-century *Herball* he recommends daisies for a whole host of complaints, including '*all kinde of paines*', '*hot burning fevers*' and the after-effects of '*some stroke*'. Perhaps his most surprising prescription is the juice of daisy roots which '*given to little dogs with milke keepeth them from growing great*'. Small lapdogs were popular with nobility during the Elizabethan era; breeders tried many different ways of artificially stunting the growth of dogs to keep them tiny, including potent herbal concoctions. What's even more disturbing is that it was also thought both daisy juice and knot-grass would keep children deliberately small, so they could be put to work earning money at fairs, sideshows and private levees for the wealthy. Shakespeare alludes to this hateful practice in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

(1595), when he writes, '*Get gone you dwarf; You minimus, of hindering knot-grass made*.'

Daffodil

...daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *THE WINTER'S TALE* (1623)

When William Shakespeare used the word 'take' in his description of the daffodil, he meant the 'winds of March' were charmed by the sheer loveliness of this early springtime flower. And how dazzling these harbingers are, popping up when we're still in the throes of icy winds and cold weather; 'daffodil snow' is a phrase still used to describe an early spring flurry. In Victorian floriography, daffodils represented chivalry or respect, possibly because they were seen to wait patiently for the other flowers of spring to arrive.

The daffodil, part of the Narcissus family, has been bewitching poets for centuries, most famously in Wordsworth's *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* (1807):

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on higho'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils;

And yet many of the verses and stories dedicated to this cheerful, resilient flower are tinged with grief. In the 17th century, poet John Milton wrote '*The Daffodillies fill their cups with tears*', his contemporary Robert Herrick penned '*We have short time to stay as you, We have as short a spring*', and a century later Percy Bysshe Shelley gloomily noted '*...they die of their own*

loveliness'. The daffodil clearly has a double meaning; quite why this is, we don't know. One theory is that in early plant folklore, any flowers that droop or hang their heads represented tears or death. Herrick draws on this superstition in his 1648 poem *Divination By a Daffodil:*

When a Daffodil I see, Hanging down his headt'wards me; Guesse Imay, what Imust be: First, I shall decline my head; Secondly, Ishallbe dead.

There are also some key moments in classical mythology where daffodils or narcissi play a major role in the death or downfall of a character. Narcissus in Greek legend was, of course, the impossibly handsome man who fell in love with his own reflection, which he stared at until he died – narcissi flowers blossomed at the spot he perished. In another tale, the beautiful daughter of Zeus, Persephone, is so captivated by a narcissus flower she sees growing in a meadow that she doesn't notice Hades galloping up from the Underworld to spirit her away on his chariot.

It wasn't all bad luck for the daffodil, however. In one late 14th-century manuscript, the writer suggests an unusual way of treating epilepsy ('the falling evil') using an 'affodille':

This herb in a clean cloth, and its root
Against the falling evil is medicine.
Affodille in clean cloth kept thus
Shall suffer no fiend in that house

Roman author and naturalist Pliny had a similar notion that putting them '*before the gate of a country house it keeps away the evil influences of sorcery*'. It's interesting that historical notions of evil spirits and illness were inextricably linked – mental health problems, fevers and epilepsy were all ailments thought to be caused by supernatural forces. One medieval document suggests a cure for insanity which involves binding the patient's hand behind his back and then placing an 'affodil' flower in his right hand, while another text explains that carrying a 'daffodilly' can deliver a person from madness, keep devils out of the home and prevent night terrors.

S1111flow r

In thehopeof (ivingin a studio of ourown with Gauguin, I'd like todoa decoration for the studio. Nothingbut large sunflowers.

LETTER FROM VINCENT VAN GOGH TO THEO VAN GOGH (1888)

The sunflower has been cultivated for an astonishingly long time. Archaeologists now believe that this cheerful, energy-rich flower was first grown by the native inhabitants of Mexico over 4,000 years ago, and one of the first plants ever domesticated. For the Aztecs, the sunflower was not only a vital nutrient-rich source of food but also a symbol of their deeply held beliefs.

A 16th-century chronicle of Aztec society, written by Spanish priest Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, describes the sunflower being used in ceremonies as an offering to the Sun God Huitzilopochtli. It's thought that the sunflower's resemblance to the sun, and the fact that it turns its head, seemingly magically, to track the movement of the sun during the day, would have caught the attention of a culture who practised solar worship. Interestingly, the Otomi – a Mexican indigenous group thought to be descended from the Aztecs – still call the sunflower '*dä nukhä*', which translates as 'big flower that looks at the sun god'. The Otomi continue to decorate their churches with this symbolic flower to this day.

The sunflower also had a number of practical and medical uses for ancient indigenous communities. From purple dye to snakebite 'cures', hair oil to body paint, the sunflower proved an extraordinarily versatile plant. Spanish conquistadors brought sunflower seeds back to Europe sometime during the 16th century. Over the next hundred years, the sunflower became a hugely popular ornamental plant in high society, but also caught the attention of herbalists and physicians, such as John Gerard.

Gerard, and other contemporaries, became convinced that sunflowers had some kind of aphrodisiacal properties. During the 1570s, Francisco Hernandez, court physician to the King of Spain, had spent seven years travelling around Mexico, collecting information on the region's medicinal plants. He had noticed that the sunflower seeds seemed to '*excite sexual appetite*'. Back home, physicians tried their own recipes, hoping to gather similar results. How many of these experiments were a triumph of hope over scientific rigour we don't know but, after a number of experiments, Gerard claimed success: '*We have found by triall that the buds before they be flowered, boiled and eaten with butter, vinegar and pepper after the manner of artichokes, an exceeding pleasant meet, surpassing the artichoke far in procuring bodily lust*.' Quite how this manifested itself, the mind boggles.

Rue

But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

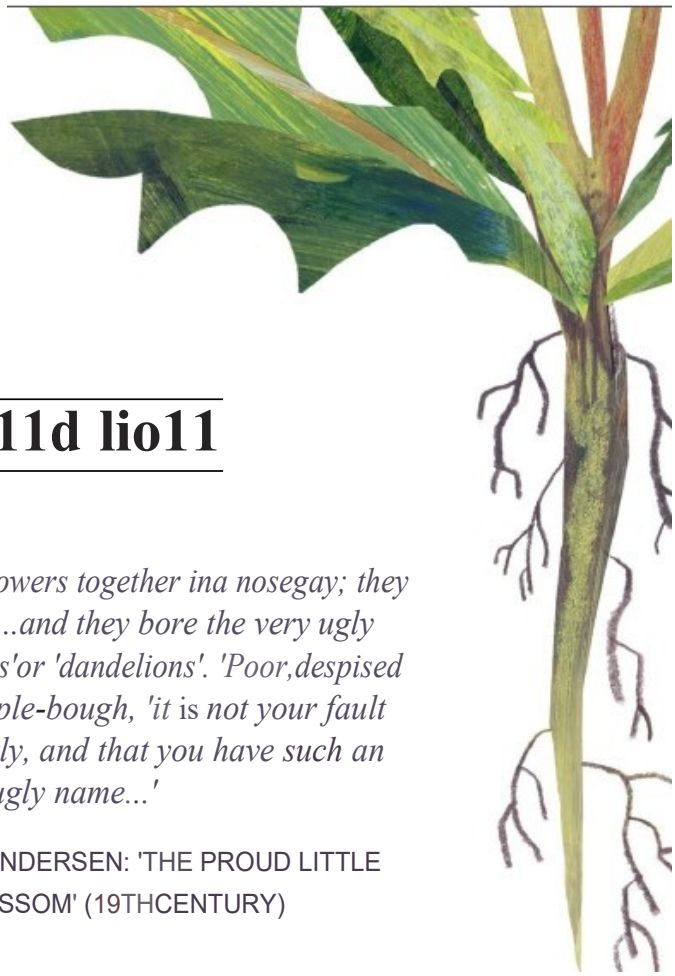
LUKE 11:42, KING JAMES VERSION

Rue has such a gloomy reputation and yet it, surprisingly, has nothing to do with the verb 'to rue'. When we use the word 'rue' to describe regret ('you'll rue the day'), we are delving into an ancient, violent Germanic past and the word *khrewan*, to cause sorrow, which in turn, comes from an even older meaning, to hit or strike someone. The plant rue, despite becoming a flower associated with regret, probably comes from a happier association and the ancient Greek *reuo*, 'to set free', or *reo*, 'to preserve'.

Either way, despite their differences, the two meanings have become one. Shakespeare brought rue into the spotlight – Ophelia famously gives Gertrude the herb in *Hamlet*, a clear rebuke of her treachery and need to repent. The ancient folk name for rue, *herb-grace o'Sundays*, comes from the idea that Christian forgiveness will follow genuine regret and repentance.

Rue has a much more interesting history, however, as a herb of healing and magic. Native to the Mediterranean region, it has been used for thousands of years by folk healers to treat stomach and skin problems, and as an abortifacient. It was also thought to have protective powers against witchcraft and the evil eye. Italians would traditionally make *brevi* (small pouches worn around the neck) filled with rue and other small sacred objects, as a talisman to keep bad spirits away. In many European countries, hanging a sprig of rue over the doorway was thought to deter witches entering a building. The 16th-century friar and enthusiastic exorcist

Girolamo Menghi recommended '*Exorcists must betray no uncertainty or take any half measures. They must attack the devil with holy water, incense and herbs, such as herb-of-grace*.' The Roman Catholic Church still uses sprigs of rue to sprinkle holy water during masses of repentance.



Da11d lio11

Noonebound these flowers together ina nosegay; they were toocommon...and they bore the very ugly name of 'dog-flowers'or 'dandelions'. 'Poor,despised plants,' said theapple-bough, 'it is *not your fault that you are so ugly, and that you have such an ugly name...'*

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN: 'THE PROUD LITTLE APPLE BLOSSOM' (19THCENTURY)

The name ‘dandelion’ is an early medieval corruption of *dent-de-lion* or lion’s tooth, from the shape of the plant’s leaves (or possibly its spiked yellow petals). Many other languages use the same analogy including the Italian *dente di leone,* Spanish *diente de león*, Portuguese *dente-de-leão*, German *Löwenzahn* and Norwegian *løvetann*.

But quirky folk names for this humble weed reveal much more about its history and character. Nicknames such as tell-time, doonhead clock, blowball and fairy clock all refer to the childhood custom of telling the time by blowing the seeds from the head and counting the hours. A similar divination involved puffing away the fluffy seeds and reciting ‘He loves me, he loves me not’ to reveal a lover’s true intentions or making a wish and trying to blow away all the seeds in one go. Shakespeare alludes to the superstition in *Othello* (1603), with ‘*All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven*.’ In Germany and the Netherlands, children traditionally blow away the seeds and ask ‘How old shall I be?’, calling out the years as they go.

Children were often told not to touch or pick dandelions for fear it will make them wet the bed. One of the earliest mentions of the flower as a remedy for urinary problems dates back to the *Tang Materia Medica*, written in the 7th century bc, but for Western herbalists the association of dandelions and pee may have as much to do with medieval ideas about ‘imitative’ magic or healing (using a yellow flower to cure a urinary problem, for example) rather than any sound medical knowledge. Other regional names for the weed include piddly-bed, pissabed, wet-a-bed and the French *piss-en-lit* (pee the bed).

Folklore remedies involving dandelions range from the pragmatic to the plain bizarre. One involved rubbing the white, milky sap from the dandelion stalk onto a troublesome wart or sting, giving the plant yet another nickname, ‘Devil’s Milk Pail’, or in Danish *Mælkebøtte* (milk tub), while an old American folk tradition was to eat dandelion leaves on Maundy Thursday to prevent fever. In early Victorian Ireland, chewing the leaves of the dandelion was thought to help with heart problems; thousands of miles away, the Native American Meskwaki were nibbling on dandelion root for exactly the same problem.

Wattle

...in *spring, themost delicate feathery yellow of plumes and plumes and plumes and trees and bushes of wattle,as if angels had flown right downoutof the softest gold regions of heaven tosettle here,in theAustralian bush.*

D. H. LAWRENCE: *KANGAROO* (1923)

Acacias are known as wattles in Australia. They're a spectacularly ancient group of plants – more than a thousand different types of wattle currently grow across the one continent – and have come to symbolise not only indigenous Australian culture but also colonial settlers' hopes and experiences.

Aboriginal people have been present in Australia for around 50,000 years. For all that time, these ancient communities have made use of the wattle's numerous treasures; every part of the plant is useful, from the bark to the blossoms, the wood to the roots. From shields and digging sticks to medicine and glue, wattle plants hold not only practical significance but also spiritual resonance. In the Yarra Valley, for example, the silver wattle is called the Muyan by the Wurundjeri people. When the wattle blooms, not only is it a seasonal sign that it's time to fish for eels but it's also the signal to remember past Elders. The Wurundjeri also carve boomerangs from the wattle root, drink sweet wattle gum water, and make remedies for coughs, stomach pain and rheumatism. Vast tracts of Australian land are now known by their indigenous wattle names including Myall (*Acacia pendula*), Mulga (*Acacia aneura*), Brigalow (*Acacia harpophylla*) and Gidgee (*Acacia cambagei*).

The name 'wattle' came from late 18th-century settlers who used the sticks of various acacia species to create makeshift wattle-and-daub buildings – wattle and daub was the medieval building method that used woven sticks (wattle) covered with mud or dung (daub). For early colonial settlers, the fact that wattle was found in every state and territory, and across the hugely diverse eco-systems of Australia, helped the plant become a potent symbol of patriotism. The first national Wattle Day was celebrated with street decorations, wattle planting and the wearing of wattle sprigs on 1st September 1910, but the plant soon took on extra significance with the outbreak of the First World War, when people wore wattle buttonholes and badges to raise money for the war effort and the Red Cross. Wattle and the memory of those who died in that war became so intertwined that, when Australians finally managed to visit the Western Front in the mass War Graves Pilgrimage of 1929, family members took sprigs of wattle to lay on their loved ones' graves.

Pansy

Yet mark'd where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound
And maidens call in love-in-idleness

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* (1595)

The idea that a magic potion could make someone fall hopelessly in love is as old as time itself. For centuries, people have been concocting potent drinks in the hope of making the object of their desire return their love or giving nascent feelings a helpful push in the right direction. One of the best-known examples is employed by Puck, a mischievous fairy in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Puck's potion contains 'heartsease', or wild pansy as it's more commonly known, and causes Queen Titania to fall head over heels for the first creature she sees upon waking, who happens to be Bottom, the ass-headed weaver.

For Shakespeare's audience, the idea of a powerful love potion – or 'philtre' – wouldn't have seemed unusual. Medieval love potions were commonplace and the idea of creating 'spells that woo' stretches far back into history (the British Library holds an extensive Egyptian collection dating back as early as the 3rd century AD). Many of these love potions contain ingredients that, by virtue of their shape or associations, were thought to incite romantic and sexual feelings. The hearts and reproductive organs of animals were a favourite, for example, as were heart-shaped flowers, such as the pansy. Folk names for the pansy attest to its popularity as a love potion ingredient – there are dozens of charming, titillating examples including Tickle-my-fancy, Come-and-cuddle-me, Heart's Delight, Jack-jump-up-and-kiss-me, Kiss-and-look-up, Kiss-her-in-the-buttery, Call-me-to-you and Loving Idol. The

French name for the flower is *pensée sauvage*, or ‘wild thoughts’ (pansy is also a corruption of *pensée*).

In Shakespeare’s time, however, you had to be careful what you wished for. During the 16th century, syphilis, one of the deadliest of all sexually transmitted diseases, ravaged large sections of Europe, including London. Without access to penicillin, sufferers felt the full force of the disease, succumbing to raging fevers, insanity and hideous, agonising lesions. Elizabethan barber-surgeon William Clowes noted that London had so many syphilis victims that hospitals simply couldn’t accommodate the ‘*infinite multitude*’. One of the only treatments of the day was a syrup recommended by physician Nicholas Culpeper for what he called the ‘French pox’. It was made – ironically – from the very flower thought to attract a lover in the first place, the humble pansy.

Chrysanthemum

Autumn comes, bringing the scent of chrysanthemum blossoms
In remote hills, the traveller searches once again.
Their dewy leaves look like soaked jade,
The blossoms in the wind resemble scattered gold.

CUI SHANWEI (7TH CENTURY)

Few plants are as important to the Chinese as the chrysanthemum or *jú huā*. As an autumn flowering plant, chrysanthemums thrive when the rest of the garden is beginning to die, a resilience that has led the flower to become a potent cultural symbol.

Autumn has always held a melancholy place in ancient Chinese culture – spring and summer were the seasons of growth and maturation, while autumn and winter the months of destruction and retreat. Traditionally, for example, public executions only took place in the autumn/winter period, in line with the 'natural order' of things, and it was also the time of year when hermits and scholars would withdraw from public life. The chrysanthemum, therefore, became the flower of Confucian followers – a symbol of moral character, wisdom and gracious isolation.

The 'Four Gentleman' in Chinese art and literature refers to four key plants: plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum, all loved for their beauty but also given moral characteristics. The chrysanthemum blooms under harsh conditions, symbolising an ability to weather adversity and thrive into old age. It was thought that drinking chrysanthemum wine or tea on the Chung-Yeung festival (the ninth day of the ninth month) would give you a long life or, if you were really lucky, immortality.

One of the earliest mentions of the chrysanthemum in Chinese literature dates from the *Book of Rites* or *Li Ji* (first compiled around 500 bc), but it wasn't until nearly a thousand years later that the flower made its way to Japan. There the flower is known as *kiku*; the chrysanthemum kept its symbolism of longevity but was also adopted as the flower of the imperial family and, later, the government. The Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum is the highest honour in the country and Japan's National Chrysanthemum Day, *Kiku no Sekku*, is also called the Festival of Happiness, although white chrysanthemums are also the flower of funerals.

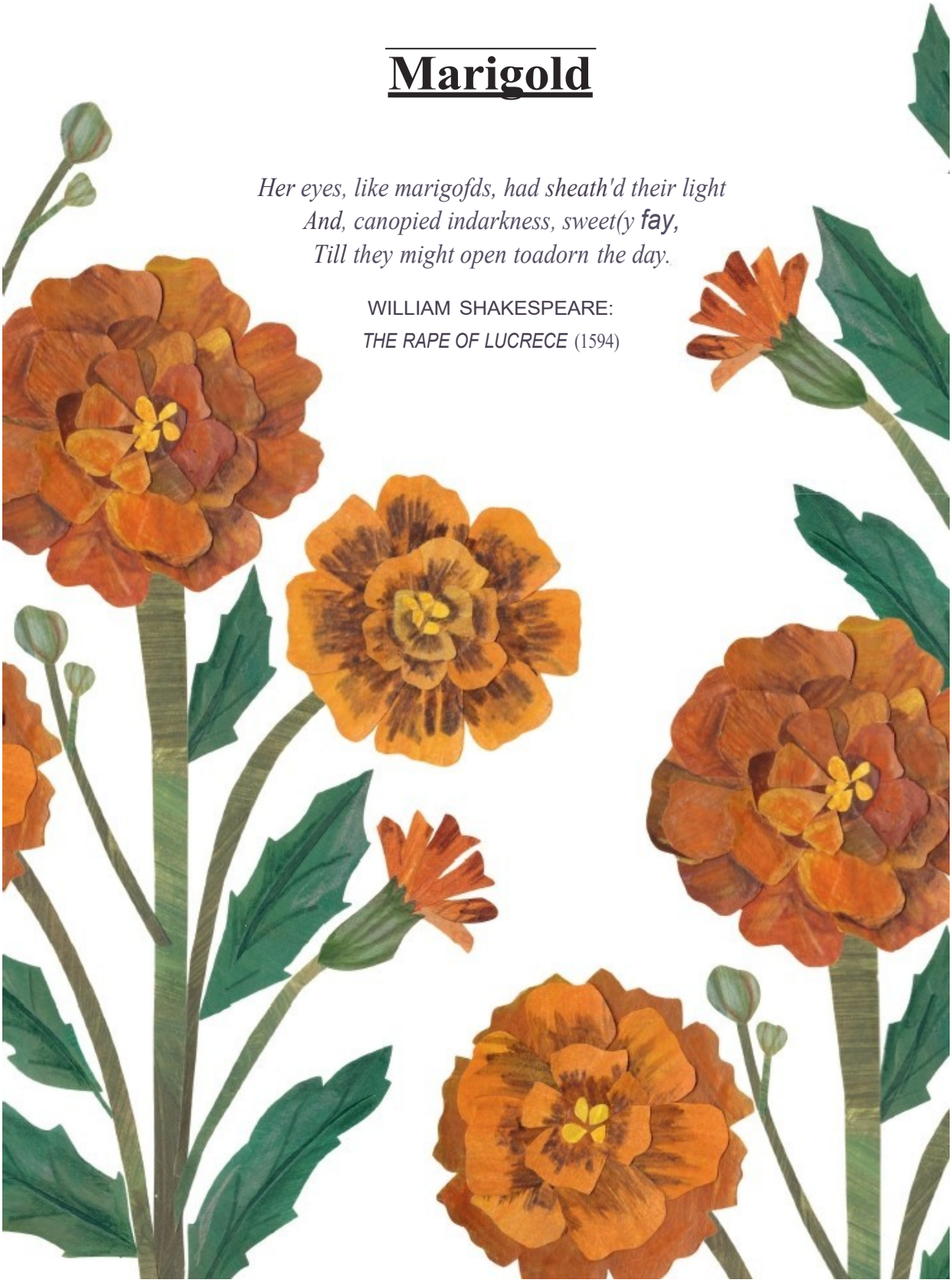
It was only in the 18th century that the flower was given the name we know it by today. From the Greek *chrysos* (gold) and *anthos* (flower), chrysanthemums have come to hold different meanings depending on their colour. In Victorian floral code, red signifies deep love and white represents truth.

There are some unusual European legends that link white chrysanthemums to the Christ Child. One tells us the flower was born at the same time as Jesus – when the three kings arrived at the stable, one of them saw a white chrysanthemum growing outside, picked it and handed it to the baby; Charles Skinner, in *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* (1896) explains, '*All went to their knees before the shining presence, bearing the winter flower, white likeness of the guide star*.' Another legend, from Germany's Black Forest, recalls a peasant family who took in a ragged urchin they found on their doorstep on Christmas Eve. After they fed him, he revealed himself to be the Christ Child and vanished. The next morning, two white chrysanthemums mysteriously appeared on the doorstep.

Marigold

Her eyes, like marigofds, had sheath'd their light
And, canopied indarkness, sweet(y fay,
Till they might open toadorn the day.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE:
THE RAPE OF LUCRECE (1594)



In medieval medicine the supernatural world and real world were intertwined. Certain plants were believed to have 'magiferous' or magic-giving qualities; some were completely invented, imaginary flowers from ancient fireside stories, that could bestow superhuman powers such as the ability to fly or bring someone back to life; others were real-life plants, growing in the fields and forests, which, if used in a healing ritual, could suddenly possess 'magical' powers. Marigold was one of these.

To transform an everyday plant into a spell-weaving one, certain actions had to be taken – these often included rituals like picking a plant at a specific time of day or year, taking the treatment a special number of times (in doses of three, for example), or saying a certain rhyme as you picked and prepared the flower.

In the case of the marigold, medieval herbal texts stated whoever sees a marigold first thing in the morning will be protected from fevers all day. If you wanted to gather the plant, to create a cure, it was important to collect it in August, when the moon was in Virgo, and the picker mustn't eat any food or drink that day. Morally, the gatherer must also be pure '*ande out of dedly synne*'. Once the marigold had been picked, it must be wrapped in laurel leaves and '*a wolf 's tooth*' (possibly wolfbane) and this floral amulet then protected the carrier from all evil, including malicious gossip: '*And frend and foo bothe schal the grete With wordes faire and eke swete*.' It was also a truth-telling charm; someone who had been robbed could hang the marigold amulet around his neck and he'd dream of the thieves: '*Thou shalt them bothe knawen & sene… And what that theire condicioun bene*.' Marigold's powers didn't stop there – it was also thought to cure the 'bloody flux' (dysentery): '*The leves of this herbe grunden smale and drunken wil stanche the flux*.'

The name probably means what it implies – 'Mary's Gold' – and the ancient Celtic version is also *Lus Mairi* (Mary's herb). The first written version of this name comes from a 1373 recipe for pestilence which calls the flower '*seint mary gouldes*'. Marigolds were left as devotional altar offerings in Mary's honour, the gold of the flower thought to symbolically represent real coins or, perhaps, the sun's heavenly rays. Shakespeare called marigolds 'mary-buds'. Marigolds were also funeral flowers in the Middle Ages;

because the flower closes its petals at night and then opens again in first light, they came to represent the short sleep of death before resurrection.

Nasturtium

Tis said, in Summer's evening hour
Flashes the golden-colour'd flower
A fair electric flame:
And so shall flash my love-charged eye
When all the heart's big ecstasy
Shoots rapid thro' the frame!

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: 'LINES WRITTEN AT SHURTON BARS' (1795)

Sometimes a plant name really captures its spirit. Nasturtium is a perfect example; it translates to 'nasal-twister', a name given in honour of its pungent, mustardy heat. If you've ever tried nibbling on a nasturtium flower or leaf, you'll know that nose-wrinkling, delicious peppery hit only too well.

The nasturtium is a plant native to the Americas and is thought to have been brought to Spain in the 16th century by Nicolas Monardes, a Spanish botanist. Its cress-like flavour proved uncommonly popular with gardeners and herbalists of the day; within only a few years of it arriving on European shores, John Gerard had managed to get his hands on some seeds of what he called Indian Cress and fallen for its '*rare and faire*' yellow, red and orange blooms.

The scientific name for the nasturtium is also unusually poetic. Carl Linnaeus named the nasturtium *Tropaeolum*, which means 'trophy' or 'prize' in ancient Greek. It's thought that the plant's round leaves reminded Linnaeus of Greek warriors' shields, and the bright flowers brought to mind blood-stained helmets; after a battle, the winning side would hang up the armour of the vanquished enemy or display their spoils of war as a declaration of allegiance and an offering of thanks to the gods. In the

Victorian language of flowers, nasturtiums still had the meaning of ‘patriotism’ (yellow nasturtiums) or ‘trophy of war’ (dark red nasturtiums).

Nasturtiums also presented gardeners and rural folk with an intriguing mystery. As the flower’s popularity grew during the 17th and 18th centuries, people started to notice that nasturtiums seemed to send out little flashes of light during twilight. Linnaeus’ daughter, Elizabeth, noticed this strange phenomenon and wrote a paper about it, which was published by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in 1762. Her observations became known as the ‘Elizabeth Linnaeus Phenomenon’. No one, however, could work out why nasturtiums seemed to flash in the early hours of the evening. While folk explanations centred around magic forces and the supernatural, scientists of the day thought that the flashes were somehow caused by electricity or phosphorescence (similar to glow-worms). William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge even wrote poems about it. The mystery was only solved in 1914, by a German professor, who worked out that the phenomenon is, in fact, optical, a result of the way our eyes perceive nasturtiums’ colours in low-light conditions.

Ho11 ys11ckl

Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms.
Fairies, begone, and beall waysaway.
Sodoth the woodbine the sweet
honeysuckle Gently entwist; the female
ivy so
Enrings thebarky fingers of the elm.
0, *how I love thee! how I dote on thee!*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM* (1595)

Medieval writers were intrigued by honeysuckle's habits and used its physical characteristics to craft allusions about human feelings and foibles. As it grows, it twists and entwines its tendrils around other plants. So vigorous is its growth that it can sometimes smother the very thing it clings to. Modest by day but come the evening, the flower springs into life, opening its petals and releasing its intoxicating, gorgeous scent. It's no wonder it became a plant associated with intense sexuality and erotic dreams.

The Elizabethans loved honeysuckle, using it in their gardens to create corners and covered walkways, perfect for secret trysts and stolen kisses; few could miss the allusion to sex and desire when, in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598), Shakespeare has Beatrice '*steal into the pleached bower, where honeysuckles, ripen'd by the sun, forbid the sun to enter*'. Honeysuckle could also symbolise deep, devoted love – in Rubens' early 17th-century self-portrait, *The Honeysuckle Bower*, he and his newly married wife sit shaded by a honeysuckle bush, tenderly holding hands. The meaning – of blossoming romance and married love – would have been clear to his audience. However, the idea of the honeysuckle as a symbol of co-dependent love was, even in Elizabethan times, nothing new. As early as the 12th century, poet Marie de France was drawing on the metaphor in her love story *Chevrefoil* (which means honeysuckle in French). In it, the two lovers, based on the Tristan and Isolde myth, are desperate not to be separated:

...for they
Were like the honeysuckle vine,
Which around a hazel tree will twine,
Holding the trunk as in a fist
And climbing until its tendrils twist
Around the top and hold it fast.
Together tree and vine will last.
But then, if anyone should pry
The vine away, they both will die.
My love, we're like that vine and tree;
I'll die without you, you without me.

Enid Porter, writing about superstitions 800 years later, noted that in Cambridgeshire, the flower still had a potent association with lust; locals told Enid that honeysuckle flowers were not allowed to be brought into the

homes of young girls or they'd suffer erotic dreams. Or, if some honeysuckle did sneak over the threshold, so Fen folklore maintained, a wedding would soon follow.

FLOWERS TO SAY…I LOVE YOU

Pansy
Forget-me-not
Rose
Honeysuckle
Jasmine

For centuries, lovers have spoken without words. The act of giving flowers still has enormous emotional impact; from a single rose to a hand-tied bouquet, blooms have the power to create intimate connections between people in a way no other gesture can.

Many of the flowers we traditionally associate with romance have a deep, heady scent – our sense of smell is strongly wedded to the emotional part of our brain, triggering memories and feelings, often without us even being aware of it.

The vocabulary of flowers has become narrow over recent years; few of us seem to venture beyond the rose. And yet traditionally, climbing flowers – which entwined themselves around others – often spoke of ardent, sensual passion. Both women and men would seek out wildflowers such pansies and forget-me-nots, flowers that were not only pretty but thought to hold magical, persuasive powers. And, if love was yet to come your way, plucking a handful of bluebells or yarrow was believed to give fate a nudge in the right direction.

Poppy

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row...

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN McCRAE: *IN FLANDERS FIELDS* (1915)

For much of its life, the poppy was the symbol of sleepiness. Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep, was said to have lived in a cave filled with poppies, and is often depicted as a young, gentle man holding a poppy stem or a horn of sleep-inducing opium.

Opium comes from the milky sap of the seed capsules of poppies – not the field poppies we associate with Remembrance Day, but the variety called the *Papaver somniferum* (from the Latin *somnus,* meaning sleep or drowsiness*),* a plant native to the Eastern Mediterranean region but now widespread across Europe and Asia. Early cultures clearly knew the sedative, mind-altering properties of the opium poppy – the Sumerians called it *hul gil*, 'the joy plant', while Homer's *Odyssey* notes, '*Presently she cast a drug into the wine of which they drank to lull all pain and anger and bring forgetfulness of every sorrow*.' The Ancient Greeks used opium to induce dream-like states in healing rituals.

The Egyptians also used opium – the *Ebers Papyrus* (written around 1500 BC) recommends it, alarmingly, as an excellent '*remedy to prevent excessive crying of children*'. Shakespeare writes in *Othello* (1603), '*Not poppy, nor mandragora, Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world, Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep*.' Poppy serum continued to be a cheap and easy way to keep babies quiet right up until the early 20th century, with 'remedies' such as Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup and Street's Infant Quietness being freely available to buy without prescription.

The poppy also has, of course, a strong association with death and remembrance. Many believe this link was made during the First World War and the poppy fields of Flanders, but they have a much older historical tie. The Ancient Greeks viewed poppies as a sign of death and reincarnation – Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, was often depicted with a motif of poppy heads, while Heraclides Ponticus (4th century bc) wrote about the practice of using opium for euthanasia. Before the First World War, in the Victorian language of flowers, red poppies also meant consolation. Battlefields and poppies have, in fact, been bedfellows for hundreds of years: field poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*) thrive on churned, upturned soil, white poppies were said to have sprung up on the bloodied battlefields of Genghis Khan, while after the Battle of Waterloo, the freshly buried graves of

Napoleon's soldiers were quickly covered by a carpet of red poppies fed, so the locals believed, by the blood of the dead.

Perhaps one of the least known uses of poppies was in a mixture called *theriac*. This ancient Greek concoction, thought to have emerged during the 1st century AD, was said to be a cure-all and used to treat all manner of complaints including snake bites and bubonic plague. Opium was mixed with other sticky, sweet-smelling ingredients, including honey and cinnamon. *Theriac* is where we get the modern word 'treacle'.

Hydrangea

Two wooden tubs of blue hydrangeas stand at the foot of the stone steps.
The sky is a blue gum streaked with rose. The trees are black.

WALLACE STEVENS: 'BANAL SOJOURN' (1919)

The hydrangea is one of Japan's most famous flowers. Its appearance often marks the beginning of the rainy season and, coincidentally, its European name *hydrangea* is also connected with water; the name literally translates to 'small water vessel' – a reference to the shape of its seed capsules.

A flower famous for changing its colour depending on the acidity or alkalinity of the soil, in traditional Japanese folk art and poetry the hydrangea has often symbolised fickle feelings or disloyalty. Although widely known as *ajisai*, meaning a 'collection of blue', another Japanese name for hydrangea is *nanahenge,* or 'seven transformations', alluding to its colour-shifting, ever-changing character.

The hydrangea has, however, long been a vital part of tea ceremonies. *Amacha* (which translates to 'sweet tea') is a herbal drink made from the hydrangea plant and traditionally served on 8th April to celebrate Buddha's birthday. Since the early 7th century AD, worshippers have been visiting their local temples on that auspicious day to spoon a ladleful of sweet tea over effigies of Buddha in a ceremony known as *kanbutsu*.

The hydrangea didn't reach European shores until the 1700s. While it became a favourite with gardeners and plant collectors, who loved breeding newer, ever more dazzling cultivars, the hydrangea itself didn't endear itself to everyone, especially Victorian fans of floriography. Some felt that hydrangea's pom-pom, showy heads showed a propensity to boastfulness or

vanity. Others noted hydrangeas produced spectacular sensuous flowers but, ironically, few fertile seeds; if a spurned or jilted gentleman was feeling particularly cruel he would send a bouquet of hydrangeas to the lady in question, telling her – in code – she was frigid or cold.

Rose

A

This elegant rose, had I shaken it less,
Might have bloom'd with its owner awhile,
And the tear that is wip'd with a little address,
May be follow'd perhaps by a smile.

WILLIAM COWPER: 'THE ROSE' (1783)

The rose – a flower so intertwined with ideas about love that it's difficult to unpick where the story begins. One of the oldest flowers to be cultivated, by the time of the Greeks and Romans the rose had become the favourite flower of poets and romantics: '*If Zeus had wished to give the flowers a king*,' wrote Achilles Tatius in the 2nd century AD, '*he would have named the rose, for it is the ornament of the world, the glory of plants, the eye of flowers, the blush of the meadow…the agent of Aphrodite.*' Aphrodite was the ancient Greek goddess of love and pleasure. As her lover Adonis lay dying, she was said to have pricked her foot on a white rose and stained it red with her blood; the red rose has symbolised passionate love ever since. In Homer's *Iliad*, Aphrodite also embalms the dead body of the warrior Hector with oil 'rose-sweet, ambrosial', an act of great intimacy and meaning.

The rose proved the perfect metaphor for female sexuality; over the centuries, women and their sexual maturity, have been compared to the budding, opening and eventual decay of the rose. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601), Orsino declares, '*For women are as roses, whose fair flower Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour*.' The flower, with its deep, folded, fragrant petals proved fertile ground for medieval allusions to female genitalia, while the act of taking a girl's virginity was referred to as 'plucking a rose'; only recently a witty poem dating back to the 1300s emerged, called *Der Rosendorn* (The Rose Thorn), in which a virgin argues with her talking vulva about which of them men prefer.

Roses feature in numerous poems about lust and sexual longing, from Richard Lovelace's 17th-century '*Rosie in her Bower, Her floore is all the Flower, Her Bed a Rosie Nest, By a Bed a Roses Prest*' to Robert Burns' barely coded '*O, my love is like a red, red rose, That's newly sprung in June*'. Time was often of the essence, it seems; many poems encourage girls to welcome the advances of their suitors should their rose-like attraction fade, from Robert Herrick's '*Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may, Old Time is still a-flying*' to Edmund Waller's '*Go, lovely Rose –Tell her that wastes her time and me.'* As roses have spikes, however, so too could a woman's love hurt, as in the traditional saying '*Every rose has its thorn*.' The rose-and-thorn analogy also represents the duality of sexual love – the pleasure and pain – which is why, in representations of the Virgin Mary, she is often referred to as the sinless 'rose without thorns'.

Ecl1i11ac a

The name Echinacea is *from echinos,a hedge-hog, inaUusion tothe thorniness of the invo(ucre.*

JANE LOUDON: ***THE LADIES' FLOWER-GARDEN OF ORNAMENTAL PERENNIALS*** **(1843)**

While the rose is the officially designated emblem of the United States, perhaps no other flower is as uniquely American as the echinacea. This colourful member of the daisy flower originally only grew on American soil, across eastern and central prairies and wooded areas, but has become a popular cottage-garden flower across Europe and, more importantly, a phenomenally successful and widely used medicinal plant.

Echinacea first made the journey from America to Europe sometime in the late 1600s. Botanists among the early colonial settlers in Virginia noticed the plant being used as a medicine by local Native American tribes and sent seeds back to interested European colleagues; in his 1680 *Plantarum Historiae Universalis Oxoniensis*, Professor of Botany at Oxford University, Robert Morison, mentions a new plant he calls the 'Bite of the Devil', possibly from echinacea's pungent, strong-tasting root. Morison also gave the plant its first scientific name *Dracunculus virginianus* (Little Dragon of Virginia), later to be renamed echinacea.

For European settlers in America, echinacea was an exciting new discovery but indigenous Native Americans had been using the plant for hundreds of years, believing it capable of great power and healing. Its uses were myriad – the Blackfoot tribe, for example, used echinacea root for toothache, while the Choctaw treated both coughs and tummy problems with it. The Delaware used it to treat venereal disease, a habit copied by colonial folk practitioners, who call the syphilis-treating herb 'black Samson' or 'red sunflower', while the Sioux took echinacea as an antidote for snake bites.

In the late 1800s, a Nebraskan man called H.C.F. Meyer decided to market echinacea as a wonder drug. Both a visionary and a quack, Meyer created a herbal medicine he called 'Meyer's Blood Purifyer', and grandly announced it to be the 'Slayer of All Ailments'. Meyer was so convinced of its efficacy that he volunteered to be bitten by a rattlesnake in front of doctors and treated with his own remedy. The medical profession declined Meyer's bizarre offer, but the stunt was wild enough to bring echinacea to the attention of the world. It still remains one of the most popular herbal remedies in use today.

Oleander

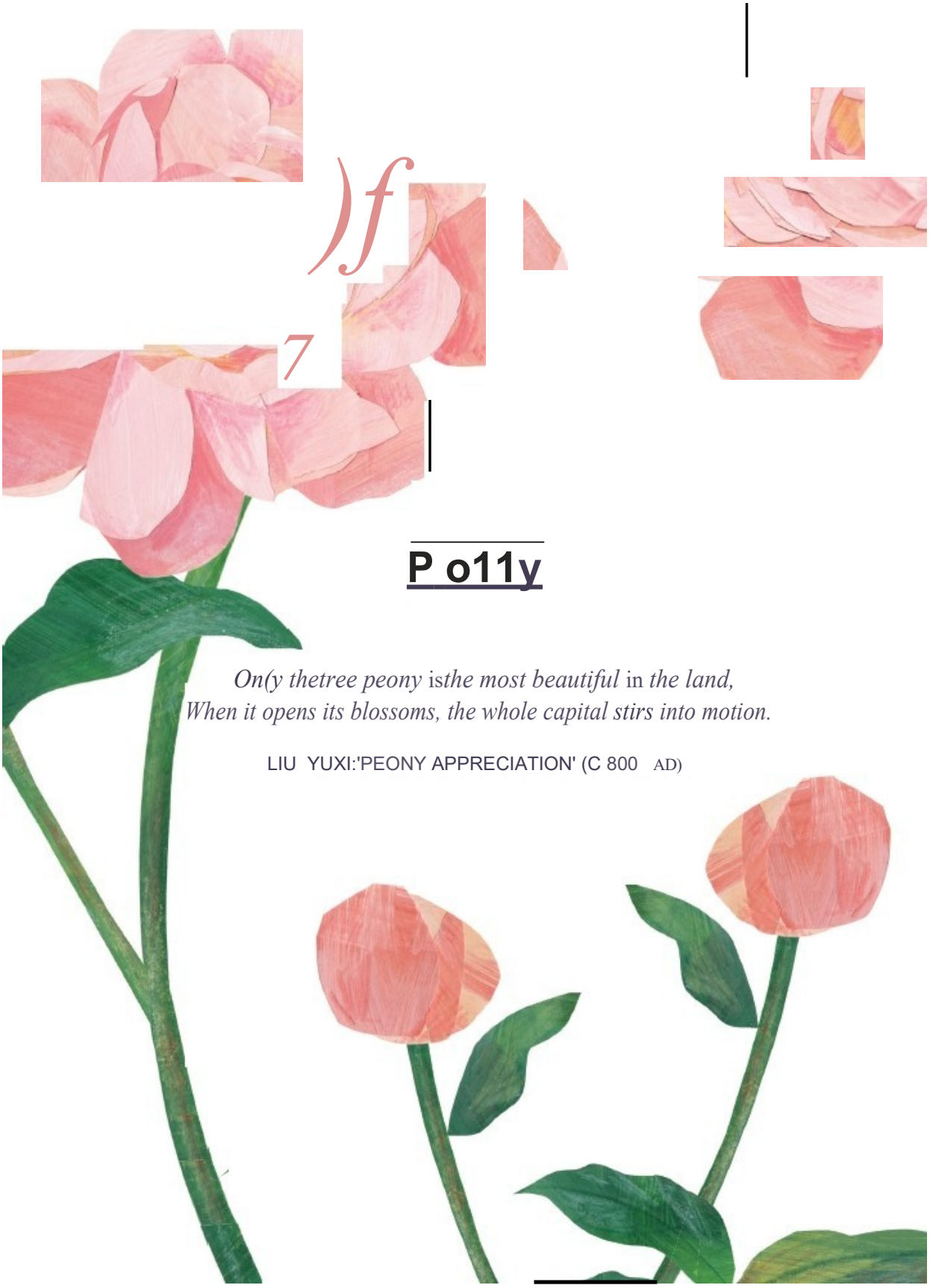
...if it be inwardly taken it is deadly and poisonsome,
not only to men, but also to most kinds of beasts.

JOHN GERARD: *HERBALL* (1597)

The ancient world was thought to be filled with capricious gods, controlling the fate of mankind. The Greeks, wanting to know what the gods might have in store for them, would consult oracles, divine fortune tellers who had a direct line to the cosmos. The most famous of these was the Pythia, the prophetess of Apollo. The oracle sessions were dramatic affairs. The Pythia had to bathe naked in a sacred spring, sacrifice a goat, and then inhale the vapours of burning leaves and branches before falling into a deep trance, from where she would recite Apollo's wishes. For centuries, academics wondered what these hallucinogenic leaves and twigs could have been. The original name in texts had been misinterpreted as 'bay leaves', which produce no narcotic effect. Recent research, however, has solved the mystery. It was oleander, a flowering shrub native to southwest Asia and the Mediterranean. It's a highly toxic plant – lethal if ingested in even moderate amounts – but also known to cause tremors and delusions if you inhale oleander smoke or nibble tiny pieces.

Such was oleander's reputation as a toxic plant that William Turner, writing in the 16th century, in *A New Herball* warned, '*I have seen this tree in divers in Italy, but I care not if it never came to England…it is beauteous without, and within a ravenous wolf and murderer.*' He also recommends that the only reason to take oleander would be if you'd been bitten by a serpent and, even then, the 'cure' is as likely to kill as the venom. An 1844 edition of *The Gardeners' Chronicle* also relates a poisoning saga: '*In 1809, when the*

French troops were lying before Madrid…one solider formed the unfortunate idea of cutting the branches of oleander for spits and skewers for the meat when roasting…of twelve soldiers who ate the roast seven died, and the other five were dangerously ill.' Retellings of this story still do the rounds as an urban myth, although the time, place and victims have all been updated; one version features a fateful boy scout troop who all die after toasting their marshmallows on oleander sticks.



P o11y

On(y thetree peony is*the most beautiful* in *the land,*
When it opens its blossoms, the whole capital stirs into motion.

LIU YUXI:'PEONY APPRECIATION' (C 800 AD)

According to Chinese folklore, 1,500 years ago a vain and cruel woman called Wu Zetian proclaimed herself Empress of China. To celebrate her success, she decreed that all the flowers in the imperial gardens should bloom at once. It was New Year, however, and some flowers weren't in season. As the Empress toured the grounds she was, at first, thrilled to see so many trees and flowers blossoming in her honour. The magnificent peony, however, refused to open. Furious at the peony's insolence, the Empress demanded that every last peony in the royal garden should be dug up and destroyed. She also decreed that anyone caught cultivating peonies would be instantly put to death. Years later, the Empress fell gravely ill. Her physicians knew that the only medicine that could help was made from the peony. Court officials scoured the kingdom and, at the final hour, one of the last few remaining peonies was found. Cured, the Empress realised her foolish mistake and named the peony, who had defied her wishes, 'King of the Flowers'. To this day, the peony symbolises beauty, wealth and, most importantly, unyielding resilience in Chinese culture.

Peonies are native to both southern Europe and Asia. While Chinese culture took the peony to its heart and used it as a decorative and symbolic motif in art and literature over the centuries, Europe didn't seem to feel the same affection for its own native varieties. One of the earliest botanical sketches of a peony was made by German artist Martin Schongauer in the 15th century, but very few paintings and ceramics feature the flower until Asian varieties of peony became fashionable in the early 19th century. The reputation of the peony as a healing plant was even worse. John Gerard, writing in his *Herball* (1597), compiles a remarkable catalogue of ancient Greek and Roman superstitions about the peony. The flower, he writes, '*is not plucked without danger. Therefore a string must be fastened to it in the night, and a hungry dog tied thereto, who being allured by the smell of rosted flesh set towards him, may plucke it up by the roots*.' Or, if you do feel brave enough to pick a peony, writes Gerard, you need a '*womans urine or her menses be poured on it*' first. Best of all, he continues, '*it must be gathered in the night; for if any man shall pluck off the fruit in the day time, being seene of the Wood-pecker, he is in danger to lose his eies*.'

Clover

Gentiles, which treat of this matter, repeat an innumerable multitude of objects, whereupon they prognosticate good or bad lucke... which regard, children and some old fooles have to the gathering primrose, true loves, and foure leaved grasse.

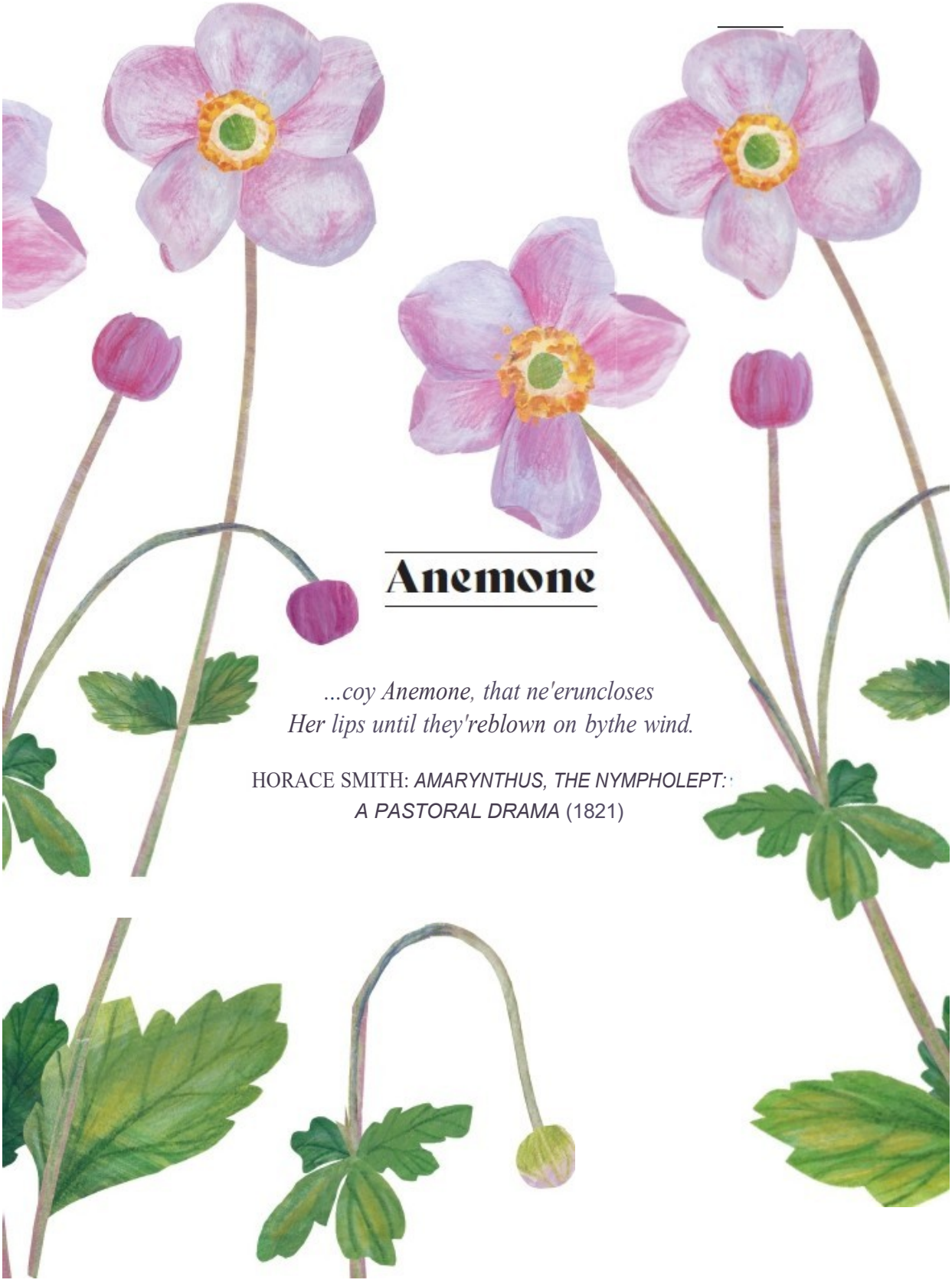
REGINALD SCOT: *THE DISCOVERIE OF WITCHCRAFT* (1584)

While King James VI was frantically compiling his treatise on witchcraft, *Daemonologie,* and rounding up innocent women to strangle and burn at the stake, a lone voice was quietly debunking supernatural myths and superstitious behaviour. Reginald Scot, country squire and MP, published *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584. He writes about the obsession many people had with lucky and unlucky objects; of all these, perhaps the most famous, is the four-leaf clover, or '*foure leaved grasse*', a plant that still continues to hold significant superstitious power today.

Across Europe, the four-leaf clover is still viewed as a lucky object. The Germans give four-leaf clover plants, cards and marzipan pigs clutching four-leaf clovers as New Year's Eve gifts to bring the recipient good luck and prosperity. In Italy, the *quadrifoglio* has also enjoyed a long history as a good luck symbol; in the early 1920s, a racing driver for Alfa Romeo painted a four-leaf clover on the side of his car, to try and change his bad luck of always finishing second. The driver went on to enjoy a string of victories and Alfa Romeo racing cars have featured the superstitious symbol ever since. In English folklore, the earliest reference to a clover's good luck dates as far back as 1507 – if a man picks one, so *The Gospelles of Dystaues* reads, he shall be '*ryche all his life*'. The four-leaf clover's link to good fortune, however, may be thanks to its similarity to the 'sun-cross', a wheel-like

symbol that has held deep meaning since Neolithic times, and is thought to have represented a sun god or his wheeled chariot.

The shamrock, a type of clover, is intimately woven into Irish culture, a symbol of luck and St Patrick's Day. Why it has become so embedded in Irish culture, no one really knows. While Irish legend talks of St Patrick using the clover to teach the Pagan Celts about Christianity in the 5th century, there's no evidence of this in his writings. The first link between St Patrick and the shamrock comes from depictions on medieval coins and, later, a 17th-century English writer and traveller, Thomas Dinley, describing how the Irish ate sprigs of '*shamroges*' on St Patrick's Day to '*cause a sweet breath*'. In fact, both clover leaves and flowers have been widely used in folk medicine throughout the centuries for conditions related to the mouth and throat: the Native American Algonquin tribe used an infusion of clover to treat whooping cough, North American folk medicine traditionally called upon clover for sore throats and hay fever, and Chinese healers still use clover as an expectorant and treatment for bronchitis.



Anemone

...coy Anemone, that ne'eruncloses
Her lips until they'reblown on bythe wind.

HORACE SMITH: *AMARYNTHUS, THE NYMPHOLEPT: A PASTORAL DRAMA* (1821)

The word ‘anemone’ translates from ancient Greek to ‘windflower’ or ‘daughter of the wind’. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, written in the 1st century AD, he tells the story of the death of Adonis, the spectacularly handsome lover of the goddess Aphrodite. Adonis, while out hunting with his dogs, is fatally gored by a wild boar. As Aphrodite weeps for her lost love, her tears fall to the ground. Where they fall, anemones grow. While the anemones were beautiful, they were also fleeting, their petals easily blown away by the breeze. Every year, the flowers reappear as a reminder of Aphrodite’s grief and her hopeless expectation of Adonis’ return, her brief enjoyment of the flower snatched away by the wind. Writing nearly 1,600 years later, Shakespeare launched his career with the poem *Venus and Adonis*, which retells the tale (Venus being the Roman counterpart of Aphrodite).

By this, the boy that by her side lay killed
Was melted like a vapour from her sight;
And in the blood that on the ground lay spill’d,
A purple flower sprung up chequer’d with white,
Resembling well his pale cheeks, and the blood
Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood.

Throughout folklore, people have interpreted the reference to ‘windflower’ in many different ways. Like Ovid’s sad tale, the windflower may be so-called because its petals were easily taken by the wind, but other versions have also blossomed. Some attributed the name to the way the flower is shaken by the spring winds; others believed it was because the plant only thrived in exposed situations. The name may refer to the fluffy seeds of some varieties, which are scattered by the breeze, while Roman author Pliny, writing at roughly the same time as Ovid, throws in his suggestion: ‘*The flower never opens, except while the wind is blowing, a circumstance to which it owes its name.*’

There are hundreds of different species of anemone. The European wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*) closes its petals at night-time or before rain; folklore has it that fairies would take shelter and close up the flower petals as the raindrops started to fall or curl up asleep as darkness fell. The Chinese anemone (*Anemone hupehensis*) was traditionally used as a grave flower, while the Canadian anemone (*Anemone canadensis*) was revered by certain

Native American tribes as a useful medicine for complaints as diverse as eye problems and open wounds.

Lotus

Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON: *THE LOTOS-EATERS* (1832)

Perhaps the most spiritually meaningful of all the blooms is the lotus. This aquatic flowering plant has held deep religious significance for many cultures for more than five millennia and is still a central motif in Buddhism and Hinduism. The lotus was also key to ancient Egyptian cosmology and myth.

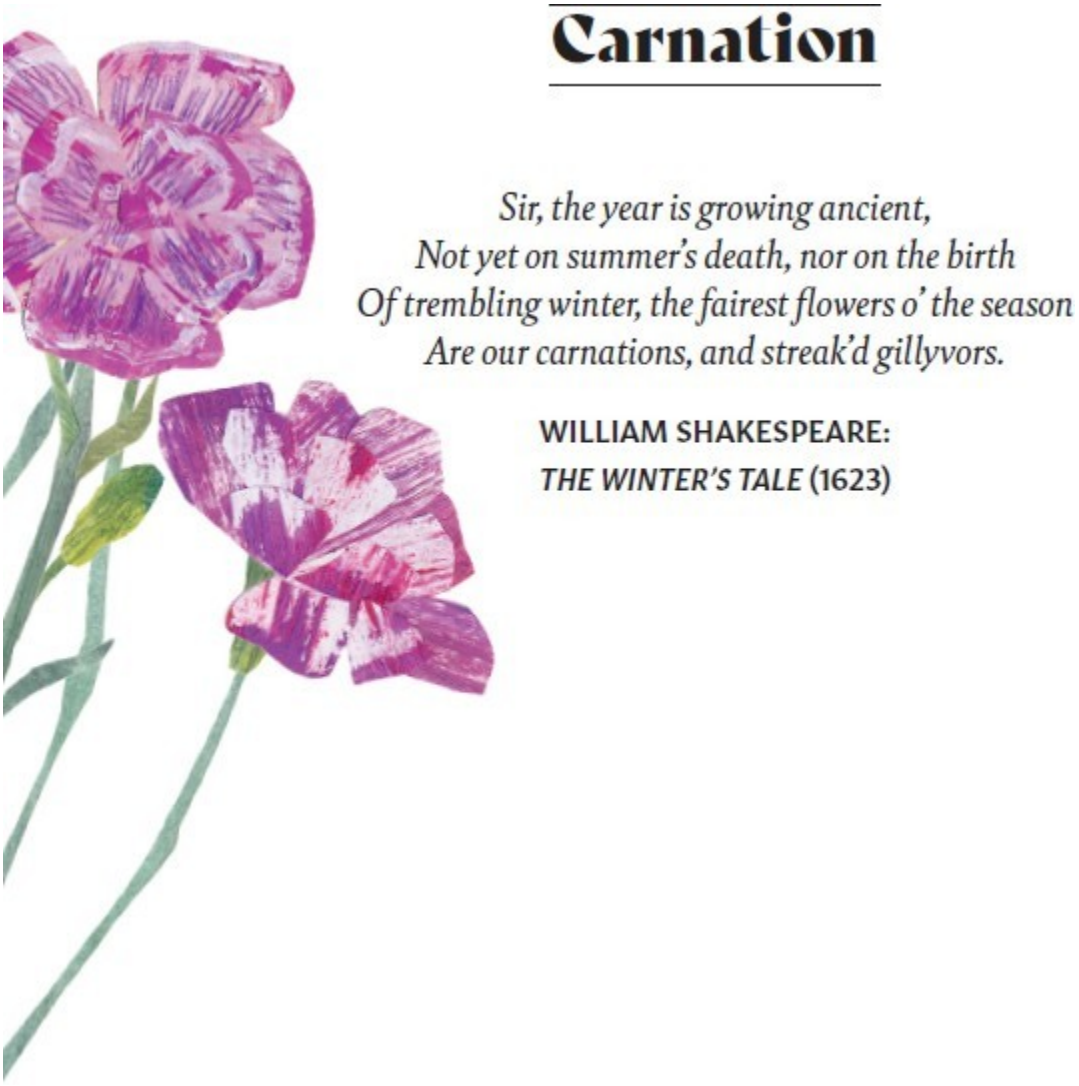
The lotus is a symbol of purity. It grows in muddy water and yet, thanks to a special biomechanical quirk, the surface of its petals can shed dirt and water, staying perfectly clean. Early Buddhist followers noticed this extraordinary ability and linked the lotus to notions about the ideal human state, namely the importance of keeping 'morally unstained' however impure or corrupt the environment. The lotus' growth also signified the journey of the human spirit, from the dark depths of materialism, through the waters of experience and out into the warm sunlight of enlightenment.

In Hinduism, the lotus represents beauty and, in a similar way to Buddhism, the idea that one should live in the world without material attachment. The unfolding of the lotus blossom also signifies spiritual awakening or rebirth, and the ability to open oneself up to the divine truth. Brahma, the Hindu god of creation, was said to have emerged from a lotus, attached to the naval of Vishnu, and the flower is also connected to ideas of fertility. Sculptures and carvings of the ancient Hindu fertility goddess Lajja Gauri often depict her with a lotus head or lotus genitals, or wearing a string of lotus beads; the

symbolism is explicit, connecting natural motifs, such as seeds and opening petals, with female bodies, sex and childbirth.

In Ancient Egypt, the lotus was also an emblem of rebirth (the Egyptian lotus was actually a variety of water lily, rather than a true lotus). The flower seemed to close up at night and re-appear fresh and anew the next morning, just like the sun. The lotus and the solar realm were intertwined in Egyptian thought – in their *Book of the Dead*, the sun god Re is '*the golden youth, who came forth from the lotus*'. The idea of resurrection was critical to Egyptian beliefs; the closing and reopening lotus flower was the perfect metaphor for a person's journey into the afterlife. The Egyptian lotus flower also had known psychoactive, trance-inducing effects, and is thought to have been used in shamanistic or healing rituals as far back as the 14th century bc.

Another plant, also known as the lotus, is central to the Greek story of Odysseus and the 'lotus-eaters', a race of island dwellers whose main food source was a plant that made them drowsy and apathetic. Rather than a flower, this lotus is thought to be *Ziziphus lotus,* or the jujube, a relation of the buckthorn and a plant widely used in traditional medicine for its sedating properties.


Carnation
Sir, the year is growing ancient,
Not yet on summer's death, nor on the birth
Of trembling winter, the fairest flowers o' the season
Are our carnations, and streak'd gillyvors.
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE:
THE WINTER'S TALE (1623)

For hundreds of years, the carnation was a staple of the English country garden. Thought to have been brought to the island by Roman soldiers, carnations were originally known as *corona*, the Latin for 'garland' or 'crown'. It's where we also get the word 'coronation', which in turn, became 'carnation'. The Ancient Greeks also loved the carnation, or *dianthus* as they named it, meaning 'flower of Zeus'. The name Zeus, who was the Greek god of sky and thunder, comes from an even earlier name *Dieus*, the 'god of daytime skies' in late Neolithic European folklore.

In Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1623) he writes of both carnations and gillyvors, but they are actually the same flower. Other early spellings included *gillyflower, gilofre* and, as Chaucer mentions nearly 300 years earlier in 'Romaunt of the Rose', *gylofre*. The name gillyflower probably comes from the Old French *girofle* meaning 'clove', a nod to the heady scent of wild carnations. Their strong fragrance also made them a favourite flavouring ingredient in medieval cooking and brewing, imparting a warm clove-spiced note to everything from puddings to preserving vinegars. In John Gerard's *Herball* (1597), he suggests that a conserve made from the flowers mixed with sugar is '*exceeding cordiall, and wonderfully above measure doth comfort the heart, being eaten now and then*'. A quick slurp, he advised, also fought against '*hot pestilent fevers*'.

According to Christian legend, as Jesus was crucified, carnations sprouted where Mary's tears fell to the ground. White and pink carnations as a symbol of a mother's undying and unconditional love continue to this day; in the early 20th century, the carnation was chosen as the flower of Mother's Day in the United States. Red carnations, on the other hand, have become associated with resistance and social movements. They were first used as a symbol by Royalists during the French Revolution, who were said to wear them on their way to the guillotine (a secret message to rescue Marie Antoinette was hidden in the petals of a carnation), but the crimson flower was also later adopted as an emblem of the socialist movement across many countries including Portugal, Germany, Greece, Italy and Russia.

Oscar Wilde is famously associated with green carnations, created by being artificially dyed. Whether Wilde was playing with ideas about gay symbolism or saying something about subversive, decadent art, we don't know. A short story called 'The Green Carnation' by Violet Harris, however, followed by the scandalous novel of the same name by Robert Hichens and an arch Noel Coward song, cemented the flower's association with same- sex love by the early 20th century.

Orcltid

Behold the Satyrion root,isit not formed like the male privy parts? Noone can deny this. Accordingly magic discovered and revealed that it can restore a man's virility and passion.

PARACELSUS (1493-1541)

There are two wonderfully surprising facts about the orchid. The first is that the plant is actually spectacularly ancient – the remains of orchid pollen were found on a prehistoric bee trapped in amber that was dated back to around 15–20 million years ago. The second piece of information is that the word 'orchid' translates in ancient Greek to 'testicle', named after the bulbous shape of the roots. The early medieval word for the orchid was also *ballockwort* or *bollockwort*, from the Old English word for testes – *beallucas* – and, of course, where we get our modern slang.

Thanks to their resemblance to male genitalia, orchids have a long association with fertility and sex drive. Pliny, writing about the orchid in the 1st century AD, calls the plant '*satyrion*', after the lustful satyrs in Greek mythology. He notes that the orchid is so powerful a plant that '*The root, we are told, if only held in the hand, acts as a powerful aphrodisiac*' and that '*by the contact only…a man has been enabled, in sexual congress, to repeat his embraces as many as seventy times even!*'

Hundreds of years later, Renaissance herbalists were still convinced of the orchid's ability to boost sexual performance and conception. John Parkinson noted in his *Theatrum Botanicum* (1640) that if men eat a large orchid tuber they shall '*beget men children*' and if women eat the smaller bulbs, they will '*bring forth women children*'. Around the same time, Nicholas Culpeper warns against taking too many orchids as '*under the dominion of Dame Venus [they] provoke lust exceedingly*'. Culpeper also seems to find the orchid's resemblance to testicles or 'stones', as they were also referred, a little trying. The orchid, he writes is also known '*as dog-stones, goat-stones, fool-stones, satyricon…together with many other too tedious to rehearse*'.

During the days of the Ottoman Empire, orchid bulbs were also ground into flour and made into a drink called salep. The name was a shortened version of the Arabic *khasyu'th-thaeleb*, which translates as 'fox's testicles', and was considered a powerful aphrodisiac drink. The beverage reached England and Germany during the 17th century; known as 'saloop', it was enjoyed as an inexpensive pick-me-up well into the 19th century. However, saloop's popularity plummeted during the mid 1800s when it gained use as a cure for sexually transmitted disease and the drinking of saloop was interpreted as a sign of infection.

Foxglove

'Mongst boughs pavillion'd, where the deer's swift leap
Startles the wild bee from the fox-glove bell.

JOHN KEATS: 'O SOLITUDE!' (1884)

Foxgloves can be deadly, and yet, for centuries, they were one of the most important flowers in folk medicine. A compound found in foxgloves, digoxin, is now known to manage certain heart problems but as early as the 13th century, physicians were blindly prescribing foxglove preparations for everything from tumours to violent headaches, oedemas to stomach cancer. In John Gerard's *Herball* (1597), he suggests '*fox-glove boiled in wine or water, and drunken, doth cut and consume the thick toughness of grosse and slimie flegme and naughtie humours*'.

In reality, the difference between a therapeutic dose and a lethal dose is so slim that most folk 'cures' must have killed as many patients as they saved. One of the most famous patients was Van Gogh, whose epilepsy was treated with digitalis, a drug made from foxglove leaves, during a hospital stay. Foxgloves have no effect on fits and wouldn't have helped poor Vincent, but some art historians believe it may have influenced his artistic output; one of the lesser known side-effects of digitalis is a change in colour perception. Van Gogh's 'Yellow Period' may have been the result of digitalis poisoning – it's also interesting that two portraits he painted of his doctor, Paul Gachet, show him holding a foxglove.

The name 'foxglove' is even older than its medicinal uses. Anglo-Saxon records show the flower described as '*foxes glofa*' (fox's glove) and may link to an old folk tale about mischievous fairies giving foxes flowers to dampen

the sounds of their paws so they can sneak up on their prey. Other etymologists think the word may derive from ‘little folks’ or fairies.

Either way, across Europe where the foxglove grows as a native species, dialects have produced some delightful twists on the name including ‘witches thimbles’, ‘fairy’s petticoats’, ‘elf gloves’ and ‘fox fingers’. In France, they’re *gantelée* (little glove) or *gants de bergère* (shepherdess’ gloves), in Norway *revbjelde* (fox bells), in Germany *Fingerhut* (thimble) and in Wales *meneg ellyllyn* (good people’s glove).

With such pretty names, it's hard to imagine foxgloves being used as a murderous poison. The Victorians associated foxgloves with falsehood and Agatha Christie used digitalis poisoning in six different murder mysteries, as did novels by Mary Webb, Dorothy L. Sayers and George Eliot. Over the last two centuries, numerous folk healers and physicians have also been tried for deliberate digitalis poisoning, including one particularly sad case:

At the late Assizes (March1851), held in Nenagh, County Tipperary, a woman named Bridget Peters, a fairy-doctress, was tried and convicted on a charge of'having caused the death of a child, by administering large doses of the Digitalis purpurea' *under an idea that the child was suppositious, and that the real child had been stolen by the fairies.*

FLOWERS TO SAY…GOOD LUCK

Clover
Lily of the Valley
Mugwort
Heather
Tulip

In a fickle world, people find solace in things that will bring them success. Whether it's luck in love or financial riches, many cultures have traditionally used flowers to wish someone providence or encourage good luck into the home. While clover and heather are well-established charms across British-speaking nations, for example, lily of the valley is a more popular good luck token in both France and Germany.

Perhaps no other country, however, has such a strong tradition of 'lucky' flowers than China. Many Chinese traditions involve flowers thought to bring prosperity and good fortune: peonies and chrysanthemums typically represent wealth and longevity, for instance, while orchids – which in Western culture have long been associated with fertility – often symbolise abundance. Narcissus, with its yellow and white flowers, also allude to wealth in gold and silver coins and have become a flower deeply connected to the Chinese Lunar New Year.

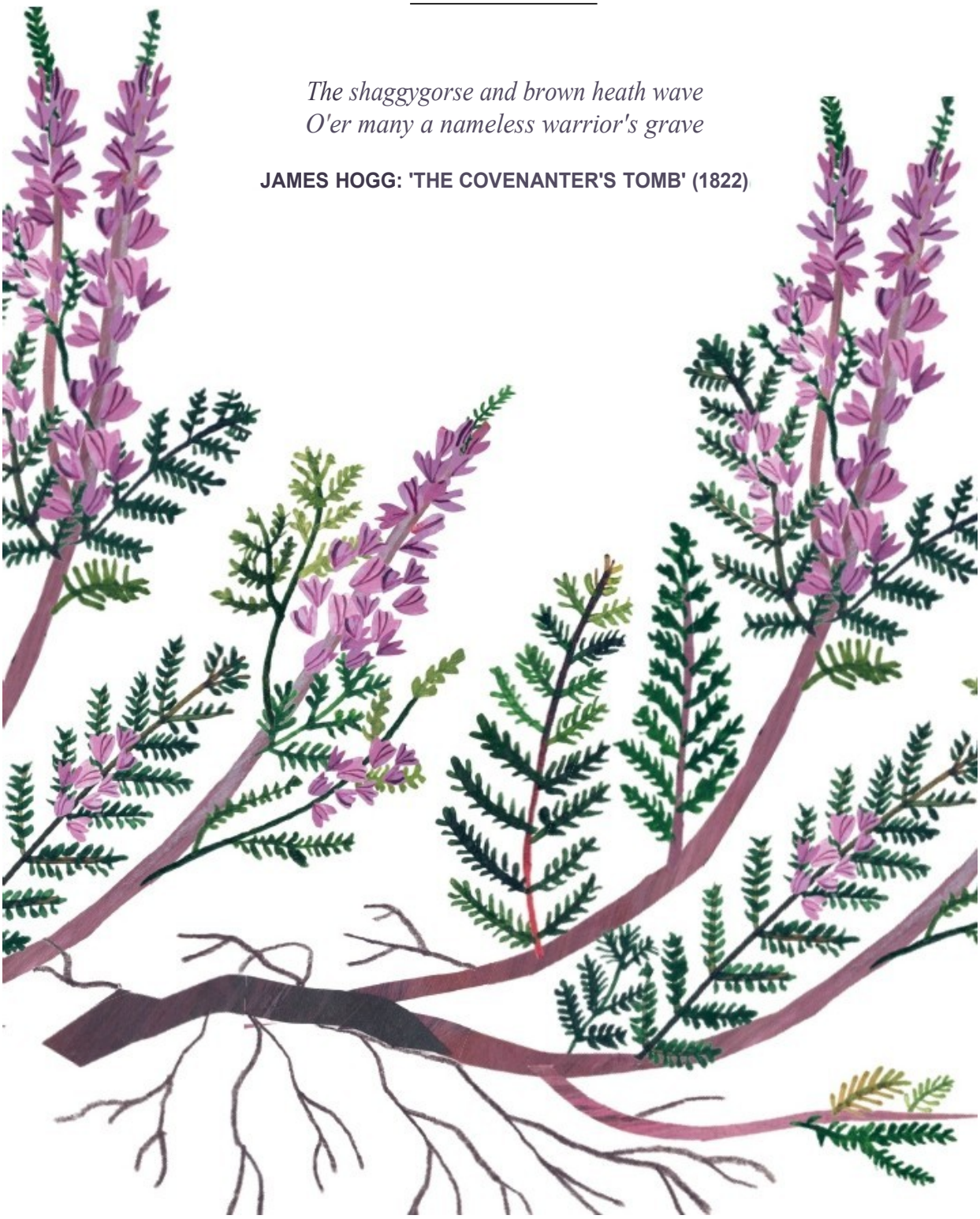
The luckiest plant of all, however, was mugwort. For centuries, this 'magical' herb was the go-to plant for divine protection. Whether you hung it above the door or concocted a potion, this sacred shrub was thought to keep evil spirits away in cultures as diverse as Anglo-Saxon England and ancient

Japan, where mugwort rice cakes are still known as *daifuku*, meaning ‘great luck’.

Heather

The shaggygorse and brown heath wave
O'er many a nameless warrior's grave

JAMES HOGG: 'THE COVENANTER'S TOMB' (1822)



Heather and the history of Scotland are inextricably linked. Since Neolithic times, the moors and highlands have been blanketed by heather, which in turn became a useful and symbolic plant for Scotland's native people over the centuries. One of the most interesting uses was 'heather ale', a mysterious fermented drink whose original recipe is lost in time. In 1890 Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a fanciful poem about the origins of the forgotten brew; in 'Heather Ale: A Galloway Legend' he describes an ancient Pictish king hurling himself off a cliff rather than divulging the secret formula to his enemy: '*Fire shall never avail, here dies in my bosom the secret of heather ale!*'

White heather has a mixed reputation, even amongst the Scottish. Queen Victoria famously promoted white heather as a token of good luck. Fanatical about Scottish legends and customs, she began the tradition of including white heather in royal bridal bouquets and wedding flowers. It's not clear why she thought white heather was lucky – academics have struggled to find any basis for her superstition – but the belief stuck. Even at Queen Elizabeth II's wedding, over half a century later, the favours were posies of myrtle and white heather from Balmoral. One thought is that, traditionally, purple heather was said to have been stained with the blood of historic battles and so white heather represented peace and good fortune. Or the rarity of white heather, compared to purple, marked it out as a lucky plant (rather like four-leaf clover). In the Victorian language of flowers, heather represents solitude, perhaps because it grows in such remote locations.

In Norway, white heather traditionally symbolised bad luck, and was said to mark the site of a crime. In Sweden, it was thought to bring ill fortune if brought into the house. Folk beliefs linking heather and evil spirits may have had their origins in broomstick brushes, which were traditionally made from heather – the Greek word *calluna*, which describes the genus, means 'to sweep'. Witches were also thought to use heather in their spells, using it to conjure rain or spirits, or as a talisman against violent attack.

Lilac

When lilacs lastin thedooryard bloom'd,
And thegreat star early droop'd in the
western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, *and yet shall* mourn *with*
ever-returning spring.

WALTWHITMAN:'WHEN LILACS LASTIN
THE DOORYARD BLOOM'D' (1865)

In 1865, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated while attending the theatre. An entire nation mourned. American poet Walt Whitman was at his mother's home when he heard the tragic news and, in a state of shock and grief, wandered outside into the garden. There he saw a lilac bush blossoming in all its glory; its transient beauty inspired him to write 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', an elegy to a president he so admired. Years later, when asked about writing the poem, Whitman noted '*I remember where I was stopping at the time, the season being advanced, there were many lilacs in full bloom. By one of those caprices that enter and give tinge to events without being at all a part of them, I find myself always reminded of the great tragedy of that day by the sight and odor of these blossoms. It never fails.*'

And yet Whitman's choice of flowers may have been more than sheer serendipity. The lilac is a flower that has long represented death and rebirth, a symbol of springtime renewal, Easter and the cyclical nature of life. In both Greece and Cyprus, lilac is known by its Easter name *paschalia* (from the ancient Semitic *pasha,* meaning 'to passover'). Lilacs are still an important flower in Jewish Passover celebrations.

Over in the East, lilac played an important role in Ainu culture, an ancient indigenous people who traditionally lived in both Japan and Russia. The Ainu used a special whittled wooden stick called an 'inau' in prayer ceremonies; writing at the end of 19th century, missionary and author John Batchelor noticed that the chief 'inau' stick had to be made from lilac, a particularly durable wood. When Batchelor asked why lilac, an Ainu replied, '*It is not considered wise to use any wood other than the lilac for making the stem of this kind of fetich [fetish], for in ancient times a certain man made one of cercidiphyllum [katsura tree], the end of which rotted after a short time, so that it fell over. Not many months elapsed before the owner himself became weak and died. This was owing to the influence of the fetich being withdrawn. For this reason it is now known that the stem should be made of lilac only*'. It's interesting to note that the word 'inau' translates to 'a stick which puts forth flowers.'

Hellebore

And for mathematical sciences, he that doubts their certainty hath need of a dose of Hellebore.

JOSEPH GLANVILL: *THE VANITY OF DOGMATIZING* (1661)

Ancient cures were hit-and-miss affairs, but perhaps no other plant had such potential to do harm in the wrong hands than hellebore. Greek physician Ctesias, writing about the medicinal use of hellebores in the 5th century BC, warned:

In my father's time and my grandfather's time, no physician administered hellebore, for they did not understand how powerful it was nor did they know the correct dosage to give. If someone administered hellebore, he ordered the patient to draw up a will since he was going to be taking a serious risk. Many of those who took the drug choked to death while only a few survived.

He wasn't exaggerating. Hippocrates, writing only a few years later, agreed '*Convulsions following the administration of hellebore are fatal*', while Athenian statesman Solon famously ordered his soldiers to throw hellebore roots into the water supplies of a besieged city, causing a mass outbreak of violent diarrhoea and desertion.

And yet classical physicians continued to use it, convinced of its efficacy, especially in treating mental health problems. Those suffering from melancholy, epilepsy, schizophrenia and all manner of illnesses thought to be caused by 'harmful humours' poisoning the brain were given hellebore infusions in the hope of a cure. Drawing on the writings of earlier authors, Pliny also tells of the legend of Melampus, a soothsayer and healer, curing the madness of the daughters of King Proetus with milk from goats who had been feasting on hellebore. A good purge with hellebore was still being recommended in the 17th century as a cure for madness and 'wrong thinking', despite it also causing, amongst other things, vomiting, cramps, convulsions, cardiac arrest and respiratory failure.

As a folk farming remedy, hellebore was also used to treat animals. Small pieces of hellebore root were inserted into cuts made in the ears of sheep and pigs, cattle dewlaps and the chest skin of horses with the aim of protecting them from parasites and diseases, treating various chronic illnesses and inducing vomiting.

From classical times, hellebore was also thought to cure all manner of 'women's problems', including unwanted pregnancy. Its administration would have, in most cases, been fatal for both mother and child, but the practice continued well into the 19th century. Norwich healer and fortune teller, Sarah Whisker was transported to Australia in 1846 after giving Francis Bailey, a pregnant servant girl, powdered hellebore. During Victorian times, the reputation of hellebore as a devastating poison may have led to its symbolism, in bouquets, of slander or inconstancy.

Mugwort

If they wad drink nettles in March, eat muggons [mugwort] in May
Sae mony braw maidens Wadna gang to the clay.

ROBERT CHAMBERS: *POPULAR RHYMES OF SCOTLAND* (1842)

Few of us know mugwort, and yet, for much of history, it has been at the very centre of ritual, healing and superstition. For the Anglo-Saxons, mugwort was the most important plant in nature's store cupboard, and could be employed for everything from lucky charms to cures for poisoning. The *Lacnunga* is a collection of late 10th- and early 11th-century texts and prayers – the word means 'remedies' and the manuscripts contain a fascinating glimpse into the hopes and magical practices of people who lived over a thousand years ago. Mugwort gets a special mention, as the oldest of all the remedies, and one of the nine sacred herbs to the Anglo-Saxons:

Remember thou, Mugwort, what thou declared
What thou advised at the proclamation of the gods
First thou were named, the eldest of herbs
Thou hast might against three and against thirty,
thou hast might against venom and against that which flies.
thou hast might against the loathsome that yond the land fareth.

The powers which Anglo-Saxons ascribed to mugwort might sound extraordinary and yet they were probably drawing on even earlier beliefs. Roman naturalist, Pliny the Elder, made the fantastic claim of mugwort: '*The wayfaring man that hath the herb tied about him feeleth no weariness at all and he can never be hurt by any poisonous medicine, by any wild beast, neither yet by the sun itself*', while the 4th-century *Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius* advised, '*And if a root of this wort be hung over the door of any*

house then may not any man damage the house.' Even as late as the 19th century, residents of the Isle of Man would collect mugwort on Midsummer's Eve, which was made into wreaths to deter witchcraft. Symbolically, sprigs of mugwort are still worn the day after, on Tynwald Day.

Mugwort is ritually burned in many cultures, giving off a strong camphor-like smell. The Chumash tribe of Native Americans call it the 'dream plant' and use mugwort as incense to ensure the sleeper has spiritually meaningful dreams. In traditional Chinese medicine mugwort leaves are burned on or near the body to stimulate the flow of energy or *Qi*, while in Japan, the Ainu people used mugwort smoke in purification ceremonies, believing that the smoke deterred demons of sickness. The smoke from burning mugwort has also been used historically as an effective insect repellent. Scientists recently isolated the natural compound in mugwort – terpinen-4-ol – and discovered it was as potent as conventional, more toxic chemicals such as dimethyl phthalate. It's amazing to think that the name *mugwort* – meaning 'mosquito herb' in Old English – suggests the Anglo-Saxons knew this, too.

Tltistl

InScotland grows a warlike flower, Too rough tobloom in lady's bower; His crest, whenhigh the sofdier bears, And spurs his courser on the spears. 0 *there it blossoms - there it bfows The thistfe'sgrown aboon the rose.*

ALLAN CUNNINGHAM: **'THE** THISTLE'S GROWN ABOON **THE** ROSE'
(19™CENTURY)

Few plants have such a macho reputation as the thistle. Pliny, writing in the 1st century AD, prescribed thistle juice applied to the head to treat male baldness, while thistle root boiled in water, he claimed, could strengthen the stomach and ensure the sex of your baby was male.

The prickly thistle ('thistle' comes from the ancient Proto-Indo European word '*stieg*', meaning 'to pierce or prick') is perhaps best known as the tough, ruggedly beautiful symbol of Scotland. One of the oldest floral national emblems, the thistle motif is thought to have been adopted during the reign of Alexander III of Scotland during the 13th century, after the Battle of Largs in 1263. Legend has it that King Haakon of Norway planned to invade Scotland. Under the cover of darkness, Haakon's men landed on the coast and headed for the nearest Scottish encampment. Barefoot to avoid detection, the Norsemen crept up to the sleeping clansmen and were just about to attack when one of Haakon's men stood on a thistle. The Norse soldier yelled out in pain and his cries woke the Scottish army just in time. Scotland was saved.

Quite how true the legend is no one knows, but the thistle soon became a potent symbol for Scottish royalty. The plant was the badge of the House of Stuart from the 1370s and coins bearing the thistle emblem were in circulation from the time of King James III, a hundred years later. Perhaps the greatest honour, however, is the Order of the Thistle, a royal title thought to have been created under James III and ratified under James VII of Scotland in the late 17th century. The order was created to reward knights and peers who supported the king's religious and political goals. Its Latin motto is the characteristically spiky *Nemo me impune lacessit* or 'No one harms me without punishment' but more colourfully rendered in Scots as '*Wha daurs meddle wi me*.'

Using the thistle as an insignia sent a clear message to one's enemies. On the coat of arms of the city of Nancy, in north-eastern France, there has been a thistle since the 15th century and the motto *Nul ne s'y frotte*, 'no one dares meddle with it', which later became *Non inultus premor*, 'I am not injured unavenged'. Invaders, take note.

Passionflower

It is in good plenty, growing with Mistress Tuggy, at Westminster, where I have some years seen it bear a great many flowers.

JOHN GERARD: *HERBALL* (1597)

When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in the New World, ready to plunder the riches of the Americas and convert the 'heathen races' to the Catholic faith, they needed little encouragement. Wealth, power and land were there for the taking by any means possible, however brutal. And yet, the conquistadors felt totally justified in their behaviour, helped accidentally in no small part by a native plant.

When the Spanish first saw the flower they named *Flos passionis*, they were instantly taken by its beauty but, more importantly, by its strange and wondrous structure. For the deeply religious colonisers, the passionflower seemed to perfectly represent the Passion of Christ – the suffering of Jesus at his crucifixion. The petals, corona, stamen and leaves all symbolised different parts of the story – the nails, the lashes, the lance and the wounds of Christ; the ten petals symbolised the ten faithful disciples (minus Peter the betrayer and Judas the denier), while the plant also bore the sweet fruit of the Resurrection. Even the flower's colour linked back to the liturgical purple of Lent.

The flower was thought to be a sign from God that the Spanish mission was a righteous one; the passionflower could help spread the word of the Gospel and encourage the natives away from their perceived dark and satanic ways. One German theologian from the time, Jakob Grester, suggested that the passionflower '*symbolised Christ's reign in nature*' and that the plant's

lance-shaped leaves were a sign that the devil would be banished from the Americas by Spanish soldiers and their weapons.

Given such pious, remarkable qualities, it's no wonder that the reputation of the passionflower blossomed back home in Europe. In 1625, Italian physician and botanist Pietro Castelli documented the excitement amongst his contemporaries. The passionflower, he enthused, has been:

Most diligently sought out by the inquisitive because of its rarity…sung about by poets with divine praises…celebrated by orators in every species of eloquence…thoroughly investigated by philosophers with very subtle arguments…wondrously commended by doctors for its very salubrious powers…long demanded by the sick…admired by theologians, venerated by pious Christians. In a word, this has been remarkably desired and long sought out by peoples of whatever nature of condition for the elegance of its shape, its mysteries, its powers, and other qualities.

Such was the tension between Catholic papalcy and the Church of England during this time, however, that many Protestants took the opposing view and insisted that the passionflower was, in fact, the work of the devil. Seventeeth-century herbalist and apothecary John Parkinson, for example, claimed that it was Satan and Catholics working in cahoots who were spreading advantageous misinformation about the passionflower: '*God never willed his Priests to instruct his people with lyes: for they come from the Devill, the author of them*.' Parkinson also refused to call them 'passionflowers', naming them *maracocs* instead, after *maracot*, the original Peruvian name. In America, passionflowers are still known as maycocks, maypops or mayapples – a corruption of the original, native word.

Iris

Thou art the Iris, fair among the fairest
Who, armed with golden rod
And winged with the celestial azure, bearest
The message of some God.

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW: *FLOWER-DE-LUCE* (1867)

There's a well-known Victorian painting by Philip Calderon called *Broken Vows*. The picture is heart-wrenching – a young woman, who has recently discovered her lover has been unfaithful, leans hopelessly and heartbroken against a garden wall. The Victorians, who loved hidden meanings in paintings, would have been able to read the various elements in the composition and decipher what had happened. One potent symbol Calderon included was a yellow iris, growing at the woman's feet. Fans of floriography would have known that this little clue would have meant 'I am jealous' and, the fact that the petals were dying, been certain that the love was doomed. The ivy, covering the wall behind her, denoted, rather desperately, 'I cling to you.'

The iris, however, has a much longer history of symbolism. In Greek mythology Iris was the goddess of the rainbow, the messenger between earth and heaven and the flower may have taken her name because it came in such a glorious spectrum of colours. Roman writer Columella enthused '*Nor iris in her glorious rainbow clothed, So fulgent as the cheerful gardens shine, With their bright offspring, when they're in bloom*.'

The flower has also been adopted by royalty. The golden *fleur-de-lys* is thought to have been used as a noble emblem since the time of the Ancient Egyptians, but we associate the flower most with the crusading king Louis

VII, who chose the yellow iris as his heraldic symbol. One idea is that the name *fleur-de-lys* comes from *fleur de Louis* but a more commonly accepted version is that it comes from *flour de lis* in Old French, which means ‘lily flower’ (irises and lilies were often thought to be the same plant).

Interestingly, the name has been played around with, and misheard over the years, to produce similar sounding names with totally different meanings. Shakespeare and other English writers of the day called the iris the ‘fleur-deluce’ or ‘flower-de-luce’, meaning ‘flower of light’, while others called it *flour delice* (flower of delight). Whatever the spelling, the yellow iris is still, during this time closely associated with French rule. In *Henry VI Part I* (1591), when England lose Calais to the French, Shakespeare writes:

Cropp’d are the flower-de-luces in your arms;
Of England’s coat one half is cut away.

Violet

The odour from the flower is gone
Which like thy kisses breathed on me;
The colour from the flower is flown
Which glowed of thee and only thee!

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY: 'ON A FADED VIOLET' (19TH CENTURY)

Violets live for such a short time. Their brief appearance at the beginning of spring, before disappearing for the rest of the year, has led poets and writers to associate this tiny, delicate flower with an untimely death. Shakespeare used the violet as a metaphor many times in his plays, most famously in Ophelia's heartbroken line '*...I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died.*' After Ophelia's death, Laertes not only describes her as '*A violet in the youth of primy nature, Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting*', but even goes on to hope that, on her grave, '*May violets spring*'.

While violets represented the idea of being 'taken too soon', they also symbolised the next stage in the grieving process, that of faithful remembrance. Ophelia's use of the phrase '*withered violets*' in front of the usurping king and queen is an explicit criticism of their lack of faithfulness to her dead father. The idea also appears in a poem written by William Hunnis, from Shakespeare's time, 'A Nosegay, Always Sweet for Lovers to Send at New Year's Tide' (1584):

Violet is for faithfulness
Which in me shall abide
Hoping likewise that from your heart
You will not let it slide

The association between violets and death is clearly an ancient one. Nineteenth-century American folklorist, Charles M. Skinner, wrote *'when a Greek was buried his body was concealed with violets…so that the dreaded receptacle was carpeted with colorand fragrance*', while the Roman poet Ovid suggested that we honour the death with '*grain, salt, bread and loose violets*'. One Roman epitaph, written by a father to his dead child reads, '*Here lies Opatus, a child noble and dutiful. I pray his ashes become violets and roses*' – a sentiment that mirrors Laertes words nearly 1,500 years later.

Faithfulness was also an idea that appealed to Victorian sentiments, who took the violet to their hearts. Romantic faithfulness, especially for women, was also linked to notions of modesty and deference. The phrase 'shrinking violet' – or shy, modest woman – came into popular use during the 19th century and fans o Victorian floriography knew a posy of violets represented a lover's expression of emotional loyalty. Queen Victoria also famously adored violets – as a teenag her mother had given her a gift of '*two very pretty little china baskets with violets*'. From that moment, Victoria loved the little flowers intensely, mentioning them over a hundred times in her diaries, and growing thousands around the garden at Windsor.

When the tulip first arrived on European shores in the 16th century it was viewed as an exotic stranger. Even its Western name *tulip* comes from the Persian *dulband*, or turban, named after the shape of the flower head once, as described by John Parkinson in 1629, its leaves were '*blown, laid open and inverted*'; John Gerard also called this '*strang and forraine flower*' the Turk's Cap.

During the 16th and 17th centuries foreign trade was expanding rapidly. New exciting commodities – such as coffee, tea and potatoes – were being 'discovered' by privateers and adventurers and brought back to European ports. The foreign goods were, by their very nature, new, expensive and desirable, and merchants often conspicuously consumed them to show off their newly made fortunes. These novel, non-western tastes, including a craze for the tulip, provoked anxiety amongst some commentators of the day. Parkinson wrote that exotic flowers such as the tulip were '*strangers to us by nature',* and '*endenizoned [enfranchised] in our English Garden*'.

Andrew Marvell, 17th-century poet, went even further; for him the tulip, with its strange variegations and streaks, was a perversion of nature. He compared the tulip to a tempting, seductress who needs to paint herself and '*interline [her] cheek*'. The English Garden, feared a paranoid Marvell and others, was being transformed into a decadent, exotic harem, full of artificial pleasures.

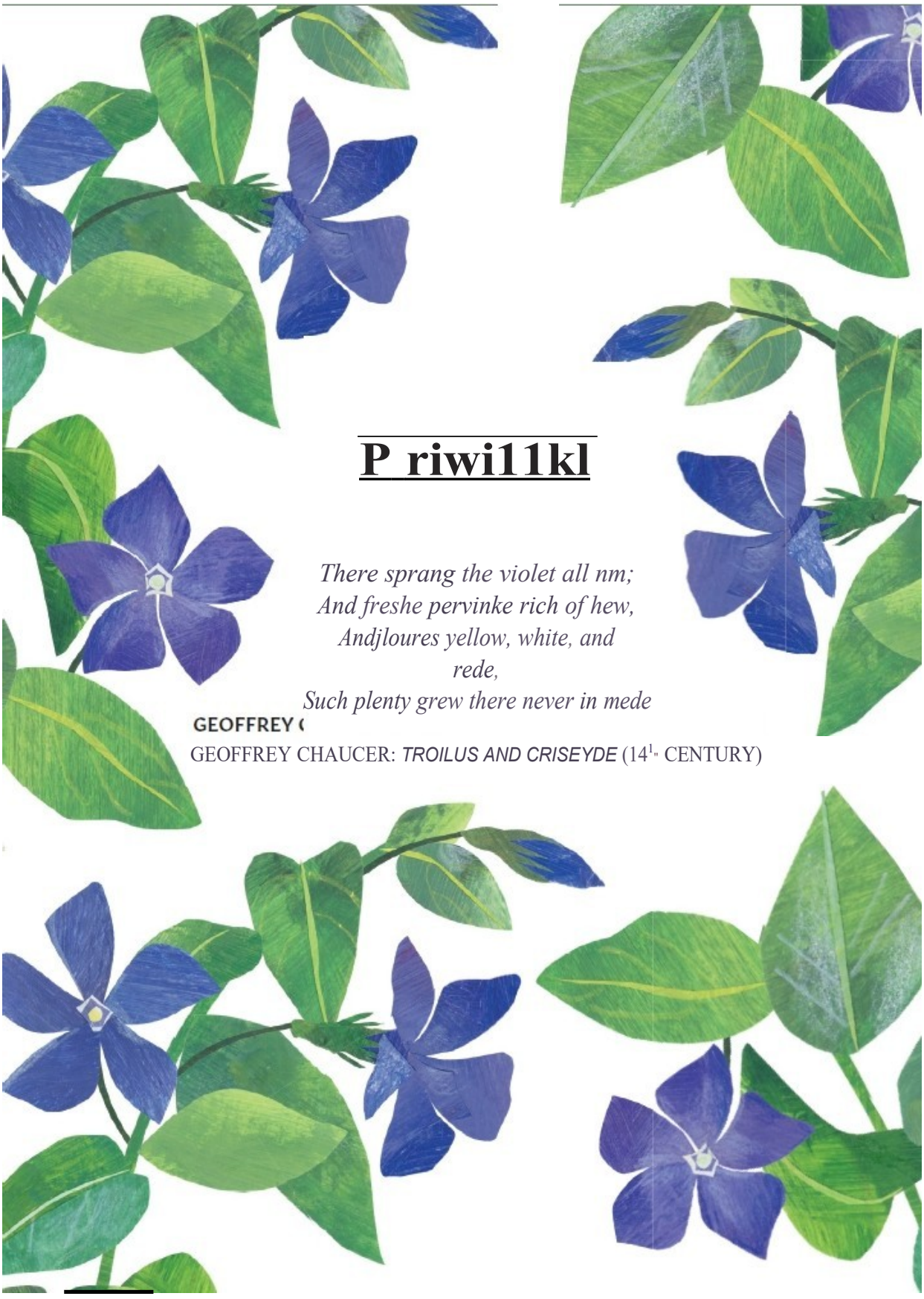
The tulip and the way it became a frenzied commodity during the 1630s – in a period known as Tulip Mania – also signified everything that was wrong with the aggressive commodity trading of the time. The high prices paid for tulip bulbs represented, for many, the epitome of greed and gullibility. French writer La Chesnée-Monstereul, writing at the time, describes the tulip as being captured by merchants who '*prostitute it to serve food for a maritime monster*', while Brueghel the Younger's painting *A Satire of Tulip Mania* (c. 1640) shows tulip traders and buyers as dim- witted monkeys, frittering their money away.

Back in its natural home in Central Asia, however, the tulip was central to the identity of the Ottoman Empire; there, the flowers were depicted in all their glory on a vast range of sumptuous ceramics and textiles, while the 16th-century Sultan Selim famously ordered 50,000 tulip bulbs for his palace gardens. The tulip was a protective, spiritual bloom, thought to guard against harm or misfortune. It was also known as 'God's flower', perhaps
because the Arabic letters used to write tulip, *lale,* were very similar to the lettering for Allah.

Tttlit>

Nature seems to plaie with thisJloure more
than any other that I know.

JOHN GERARD: *HERBALL* (1597)



P riwi11kl

There sprang the violet all nm;
And freshe pervinke rich of hew,
Andjloures yellow, white, and
rede,
Such plenty grew there never in mede

GEOFFREY C

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: *TROILUS AND CRISEYDE* (14[1]" CENTURY)

Periwinkle's name comes from the Latin *pervinca*, 'to entwine', from the flower's propensity to spread and engulf other plants. Its vigorous, binding growth may explain why, in Elizabethan times, periwinkle was thought to be a powerful ingredient in love potions. In the splendidly titled 16th-century *The Boke of Secretes of Albartus Magnus of the Vertues of Herbes, Stones and Certaine Beastes* we find a recipe for an aphrodisiac: '*Perwynke when it is beate unto pouder with worms of ye earth wrapped about it and with an herbe called houslyke, it induceth love between man and wyfe if it bee used in their meales.*'

In Ukraine, the periwinkle or *vinca* has long been associated with marital love and fertility; at weddings, the happy couple are crowned with wreaths of periwinkle or the flower used as a decoration on the marriage bread to help keep the newlyweds' love everlasting. In Germany, in the early 1800s, folklorist Jacob Grimm mentions a Matthias Night tradition of young girls plaiting periwinkle wreaths to symbolise a forthcoming marriage, while in Victorian floral language a sprig of periwinkle flowers showed someone your unerring devotion.

The Anglo-Saxons loved periwinkle. In the *Old English Herbarium,* written just before the Norman invasion, periwinkle gets a special mention. Interestingly, they call it *priapisci,* perhaps from *Priapus,* the Greek god of fertility, and view it as a talisman for protection. '*This plant...is beneficial against many things, but first against the onset of being possessed, then against snakes, wild animals, poison, and threat, envy and terror…If you have this plant with you, you are happy and always contented.*'

In French, periwinkle has been known by a few different names; *pervenche* (which the English language subsequently appropriated as a certain type of blue), *violette des sorciers* ('sorcerers' violet' for its reputed magical properties), and *pucellage* ('virginity'). The last of these names comes from its blue petals, the colour traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary. One of the oddest folk names for the periwinkle flower is Dicky Dilver or Dick-A-Dilver. The Old English '*delfan*' means to dig or root (where we get 'delving' from), an allusion to the way periwinkle's trailing stems push multiple roots down into the soil.

Sage

Tell her to make me a cambric shirt
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Without no seams nor needlework
Then she'll be a true love of mine

FRANK KIDSON: 'SCARBOROUGH FAIR' (1891)

Nearly 14,000 years ago, on a quiet spot in Israel overlooking the Mediterranea Sea, a small tribe was in mourning. They had lost two of their group – a teenage and an adult – related somehow and united in death. The strongest in the community dug the joint grave, lined it with soft mud, and then laid a thick covering of fresh flowering wild sage in the bottom of the hole. This loving, last gesture survived, miraculously, over the millennia and now provides the oldest example of humans burying their dead with flowers.

Amazingly, the practice of decorating graves with sage still continues to this day with Muslim burials in northern Israel. The choice of sage as a ceremonial plant is no accident – its strong fragrance is thought to attract angels, repel malicious spirits and offer a blessing. In fact, the sage plant has a vital role in the rituals throughout the Muslim calendar in Israel, from birth to death; it's prepared as a incense to protect newborns, burned at weddings and family ceremonies, and le on the graves of loved ones.

Native Americans and Canadian First Nation people traditionally used sage in smudging ceremonies. The aromatic fumes were thought to purify both people and objects, clear spaces and open the soul ready for contact with the spirit world. Sage was also used fresh in medicine pouches (small bags filled with items to confer spiritual powers to its wearer), wrapped around sacred objects or used in sweat-lodge ceremonies to stimulate vision and insight.

In Europe, sage was also thought to have mysterious properties. John Evelyn, writing in the late 1600s, noted enthusiastically '*In short, 'tis a Plant enbu'd with so many and wonderful Properties, as that the assiduous use of it is said to render Men Immortal*.' At a similar time, diarist Samuel Pepys, desperate for his wife to become pregnant, made a list of the special conditions he had to meet to make her fertile: alongside '*Do not hug my wife too hard nor too much*', '*Wear cool Holland-drawers*' and '*Eat no late suppers*', he also resolved to '*Drink juice of sage*'.

For centuries, it had been believed that sage held some kind of power against illness. One Anglo-Saxon text notes '*Why of seknesse deyeth man Whill sawge in gardeyn he may han*' (Why would any man die while he has sage growing in his garden?). Legend has it that four robbers, during an outbreak of the plague in France, took that saying to heart. The men, who were said to have raided the homes of corpses for valuable items, survived by using a concoction that included spices, garlic and sage leaves. 'Four Thieves Vinegar' (also known as 'Marseille Vinegar') would be splashed on their hands, ears and temples just before approaching a plague victim.

,vist ria

Wisteria blossom in clusters
Lovely coloured and
long Intending to
cherish him
I bought sake
And offered it tohim
Embracing my
beloved
Just asthe wisteria
Twines around the pine

KATSUI GENPACHI: *THE WISTERIA MAIDEN* (1826)

The *Wisteria Maiden* was a graceful *kubuki* or performance dance, popular in 19th-century Japan. It told the story of a woman lamenting her lover's fickleness. It's a subtle, feminine dance full of deep, hidden feelings; the heroine is beautiful and sensual but ultimately tortured by anguish and dependent on a man who, although she adores him, is unfaithful. In her turmoil, she clings to her lover even more tightly, just as a wisteria twists its way around a supporting tree.

It's a dance packed with symbolism. The wisteria has been cultivated in Japan for centuries, its dripping purple flowers and twisting growth intimately woven into the culture. The meaning given to wisteria is mixed but often relates to love and the complexity of human relationships. In *Kojiki*, an 8th-century compilation of Japanese myths, legends and historical narratives, one tale relates to a mountain deity called Para-Yama-Tu-Mi-Nö-Kami, who tricks his lover into conjugal relations by transforming into wisteria blossom, which she picks up and takes into her bedroom. In *The Tales of Ise*, a collection of poems written sometime around the 10th century, the wisteria represents refined emotions and protective love; in one verse, 'Glorious Wisteria', the main character displays a large vase filled with wisteria to show his sensitive side. Moved by the floral display, his brother composes a poem:

So many take shelter
beneath the wisteria blossom,
symbol of the Fujiwara clan.
Its bountiful shade
reaches further than ever.

The wisteria is also symbolic in Korean culture; one folk tale tells of two sisters who loved the same soldier in the ancient kingdom of Silla. Believing their situation to be hopeless, the girls threw themselves into a pond and, in death, turned into wisteria. The soldier, hearing of the tragedy, also jumped into the pond and turned into a nettle tree. Ever since, so the legend goes, wisteria has twisted its way around the nettle trees and become a symbol of entangled, complicated love.

Rosemary

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *HAMLET* (1600–1602)

In 1603, plague swept through the dirty, crowded streets of London. Thomas Dekker, writing at the time, noted '*where all the pavement should in stead of greene rushes, be strewed with blasted Rosemary, withered Hyacinthes, fatall Cipresse and Ewe, thickly mingled with heapes of dead men's bones*'. The idea that burning rosemary could fight against the plague was nothing new – medieval England thought that bad smells or 'miasmas' were responsible for spreading all manner of illnesses, but their choice of herb to 'blast' was an interesting one.

Rosemary has, for centuries, been a potent plant in both magic and religion. In Christian tradition, rosemary is a symbol of commemoration and faithfulness; one legend holds that rosemary flowers turned from white to blue when the Virgin Mary draped her cloak on a bush while fleeing from Herod's army. Another ancient Christian tradition states that rosemary bushes will never grow taller, or older in years, than Jesus at the time of his crucifixion. Shakespeare uses 'rosemary' as an allusion to remembrance at least six times, most famously through Ophelia's words in *Hamlet*.

The symbolic potency of rosemary may come from the fact that it is evergreen – many year-round plants in folklore (such as holly, ivy, box and yew) hold a special significance. During wintertime, when other plants withered away, evergreens represented a resilience and energy that people linked to ideas about immortality and benevolent spirits. It's no coincidence that rosemary, since Roman times, has been a symbol of stability and solemnity and the perfect herb to celebrate both weddings and funerals. The

17th-century English poet Robert Herrick remarked: '*Grow it for two ends, it matters not at all, Be it for my bridal or burial.*'

Medicinal and folk uses for rosemary have ranged, over the years, from the sublime to the ridiculous. *Banckes' Herbal* from the early 1500s, claims '*boyle the leves in whyte wyne and wasshe thy face therwith … thou shalt have a fayre face*', while Gervase Markham's *English Huswife* (1615) suggests '*when one maketh a Bath of this decoction, it is called the Bath of life, the same drunke comforteth the heart, the brayn, and the whole body, and cleanseth away the spots of the face; it maketh a man look young and causeth women to conceive quickly*.' In Turkey and Spain, rosemary was thought to protect against the 'evil eye', while in the Middle Ages, Friar Daniel's *The Virtues of Rosemary* listed an astonishing range of benefits including curing snakebites, making someone more loveable and cheering them up.

One of the less outlandish claims for rosemary was that it helped aid memory – ancient Greek physician Dioscorides wrote '*the eating of the flower in a preserve comforts the brain…sharpens understanding, restores lost memories, awakens the mind*.' Recent scientific trials have shown that rosemary does indeed contain compounds that can improve memory performance. So it turns out Ophelia was right all along.

FLOWERS TO SAY…I'M SORRY

Poppy
Cornflower
Rosemary
Sage
Violet

Recent archaeological discoveries suggest that we have been using funeral flowers for at least 13,000 years. Excavations from Mount Carmel in Israel showed tangible evidence of an ancient culture burying its dead with blooms; flowers from the site seem to be mostly aromatics – members of the sage, mint and figwort family – species that attest to spring burials and a preference for highly scented plants.

Flowers with a powerful smell have been funeral favourites in many historical cultures. The practice of creating perfumed smoke from charred plants such as rosemary, or choosing flowers with a strong perfume, seemed to do a number of things – not only on a practical level did it disguise bad smells, but there was significance to the idea that strong, pleasant odours could repel malicious spirits and connect the deceased with the 'other world'.

There is something intensely profound about the association of flowers and sympathy. Flowers have such a fleeting presence and yet they often return, year on year. For centuries, this constant rejuvenation has comforted people struggling with grief – its symbolism that, perhaps, the end is only the beginning.

Bluebell

The bluebell is the sweetest flower
That waves in summer air;
Its blossoms have the mightiest power
To soothe my spirit's care.

EMILY BRONTË: 'THE BLUEBELL' (1846)

Perhaps no other flower has stronger associations with fairies than the bluebell. A plant that thrives in dark, medieval woodland, bluebells were once thought of as 'fairy bells', capable of luring people into forest clearings where they might fall asleep, intoxicated by their perfume or, worse, disappear. In Beatrix Potter's story *The Fairy Caravan* (1929), Paddy Pig vanishes mysteriously in Pringle Wood, a wild, untamed landscape full of unseen forces. Paddy is nowhere to be found, but the reader is left in no doubt that magic beings are at play:

'*Hinny Ho! Where are you hiding, Paddy Pig?*' *No one answered. Only there seemed to be a faint tingle ringle of laughing from the bluebells in the woods.*

The idea that bluebells could entice unsuspecting travellers to stray off the beaten track appears across Europe. In a well-known Grimm Brothers' tale based on traditional German folklore, *Der Berggeister Geschenke* 'The Mountain Spirit's Gifts' (1846), a tailor and goldsmith are drawn into a woodland of fairies by the sounds of bluebells ringing, while in Scottish lore, children who wandered alone among bluebells would be taken by fairies, never to be returned.

A plant of such magical potency was also a useful tool for the superstitious. It was thought that if you wore a wreath of bluebells you would be compelled to tell the truth, but if you could turn a bluebell flower inside out without it breaking, you would win the constant love of your heart's desire. Dreaming of bluebells meant you'd soon find a passionate, long-term love.

An American folk saying recorded in the early 1900s maintained '*If you see a bluebell, pick it and repeat the following words:"Bluebell, bluebell, bring me some luck before tomorrow night"; slip it into your shoe and you will get good luck.*' One of the earliest references to the power of the bluebell comes from Isidore of Seville (c 560–636) who noted that if bluebells are '*suspended whole above the threshold, all evil things will flee therefrom*', although in the south of England it was considered bad luck to bring bluebells indoors even as recently as the 1930s.

The bluebell has also been prized for its medicinal and practical uses. Despite its powerful toxicity, bluebell juice was used widely as a diuretic, anti-haemorrhagic and even as a 'cure' for snake and spider bites. Bluebell bulbs are full of mucilage – a thick, gluey substance – that in times past has been employed as an adhesive and means of stiffening fabric. In John Gerard's *Herball* (1597), he enthused '*The roote is Bulbus, ful of a slimy glewish juice…to set feathers upon arrows…or to paste bookes with; whereof is made the best starche next unto that of Wake robin rootes* [aka Lords- and-Ladies].' Two centuries later, in 1803, a Mr Thomas Willis of Lime Street, London, was still making bluebell glue as a cheap replacement for gum arabic.

Cornflower

In the glorious fields of Flanders
Where the sad sweet poppies wave
And cornflowers keep their vigil
O'er many a lonely grave

AUSTIN J. SMALL: 'THAT LITTLE WOODEN CROSS' (1918)

When the teenage king Tutankhamun was laid to rest, he was accompanied by all the glittering treasures he could possibly need in the afterlife. But perhaps one of the most touching tributes given to Egypt's powerful ruler was a simple wreath made from cornflowers, gently placed on the pharaoh's head; a three-thousand-year-old gesture of love laid, in all probability, by his heartbroken widow and half-sister, Ankhesenamun.

The cornflower was a deeply important flower to the Ancient Egyptians. As an annual, self-seeding plant, it thrived within the ploughed fields and returned amongst the cereal crops year after year. The Egyptians saw this bright, jewel-like flower growing amongst the grains and linked it with natural cycles of death and renewal. It became a flower fit for funerals, not because it was gloomy but because its bullish, annual growth represented fertility and life after death. Ankhesenamun's wreath was a gift not of loss, therefore, but a symbol of, and aid for, Tutankhamun's resurrection in the afterlife.

In Greek mythology, the cornflower was also a symbol of healing and rebirth. Its botanical name *Centaurea cyanus* alludes to two ancient myths: in one, Chiron thecentaur uses cornflowers to cure himself of a poisonous wound; in another, a young man called Cyanus loves cornflowers so much that when he's found by the goddess Chloris lying dead in a field full of

cornflowers, she transforms his body into the flower and gives it his name. Ceres, the Roman goddess of the harvest and fertility, is also often depicted with cornflowers in her hair.

Two thousand years later, the cornflower is still a symbol of resurrection and healing. In the same way the poppy became the British flower of remembrance because of the way it thrived amongst the disturbed soil of the battlefields, so too has the *bleuet de France* come to embody the veterans and victims of war. The cornflower is also the national flower of Estonia, where it's called the *rukkilill* or rye-flower. Rye is the principal grain in Estonian bread so the *rukkilill* is not only a symbol of growth and vitality, but also wealth and sustenance.

The cornflower was also traditionally associated with Germany and Prussia; Queen Louise was famously said to have hidden her children in a field full of cornflowers when they were fleeing Napoleon's army – her son, King Wilhelm, went on to revere the flower, his '*die Kornblume*'. The flower continued to be associated with German patriotism well into the early 20th century, when it was also unfortunately adopted as a secret symbol by the far-right.

Other folk names for the cornflower have included blue-bottle, blue-blow and hurt-sickle, because the plant was said to ruin the blades of reapers' sickles.

Lavender

Lavender's green, diddle, diddle
Lavender's blue
You must love me, diddle, diddle
'Cause I love you.
I heard one say, diddle, diddle
Since I came hither
That you and I, diddle, diddle
Must lie together.

***THE DIDDLE, DIDDLE. OR, THE KIND COUNTRY LOVERS* (17TH CENTURY)**

One of the problems when talking about lavender and its place in history is that it's not always clear which plant ancient writers are referring to. In Greek and Roman times, for example, two plants which they call 'nard' and 'spike' have been interpreted both as lavender and as spikenard, the latter a totally different, but equally aromatic, plant from India.

Confusion aside, most scholars agree that classical physicians knew and used at least one variety of lavender. Its powers were myriad: as a medicine for a wide range of complaints; as a means of diluting other, more expensive fragrances; and, crucially, as an additive to communal baths. The word lavender may come from *lavare*, the Latin for 'to wash', although another suggestion is that the word comes from the Latin *lividus,* meaning 'bluish'. Interestingly, the word 'lavender' meant 'a washer woman or washer man' in the Middle Ages. In *The Household of Edward IV* (a 15th-century treatise on the royal household) it talks about his 'yeoman lavender', whose job it was to take soap from the Great Spicery and '*tenderly to waysshe…the stuffe for the Kinges propyr person*'. The Queen also had her own '*weomen lavendryes*'. Women who washed the clothes and bodies of other people may

have also been expected to perform 'extras' – it's telling that 'lavenders' was also a slang word for prostitutes. In the 14th century Chaucer also refers to a prostitute as a 'lavender' in his prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*;

Envye – I preye to God yeve hire myschaunce!
Is lavender in the grete court alway,
For she ne parteth, neyther nyght ne day,
Out of the hous of Cesar; thus seyth Dante?

Few people know that the cheery folk tune 'Lavender's Blue' started out life as a bawdy 17th-century song – 'Diddle, diddle' – which tells the story of a man persuading his lover to have sex with him.

From early medical references, however, it's clear that lavender was also a herb thought to be capable of healing the brain. The 12th-century Abbess of Hildegard suggested treating palsy (tremors) with lavender as '*It curbs very many evil things and, because of it, malign spirits are terrified*.' John Gerard recommends distilled lavender water in his *Herball* (1597) for those who '*swoon much*', while the blue flowers can help with '*panting and passion*'. Seventeenth-century physician Nicholas Culpeper recommends lavender as being '*of a special good use for all the griefs and pains of the head and brain*'. His prescriptions for its application sound unusually soothing for an era of blood-letting and leeches: '*the temples and forehead bathed with the juice of it; as also the smell of the herb helps swoonings, catalepsis (seizures), falling-sickness*'. Culpeper was clearly ahead of his time – recent scientific studies have suggested that lavender does indeed have mood-stabilising, sedative and anticonvulsive properties.

Borage

Those of our time do use thejloures in sallads, to exhilerate and makethe mindeglad.There bealso many things made of them, used for thecomfort of theheart, todrive away sorroiv, & increase the joyof the minde.

Watch a bee buzz around near borage and you'll see how intoxicating they find it. And, throughout history, humans have had the same reaction. Few of us know that, for much of its past, borage was viewed as a potent drug, a flower that gave its recipient a hit of heady pleasure. Pliny the Elder, writing in 77 AD, enthused that borage had the power to make a man '*merry and joyful*' and, when taken with a little wine, would promote mirth and hilarity. Such was its potency borage gathered the Latin name *euphrosynum*, from the Greek *euphrósynon* meaning 'cheery'.

Borage was also thought to make people brave – one of the earliest allusions to this magical property was written in 1546 by John Heywood, when he penned:

Thinke the ground beare them not, but wed of corage
They must in allhaste, though a leafe of borage.

John Gerard, writing half a century later, mentions the 'old verse' '*Ego Borago gaudia semper ago*' or, as he translates from the Latin, '*Borage bring alwaies courage*'. Gaudia actually more accurately translates to 'joys' but the Celts, Romans and Crusaders were all said to have eaten borage or drunk wine infused with borage flowers before going into battle. The word borage may have come from the Celtic *barrach* ('man of courage') but other etymological explanations are more likely – its Latin name *borago* is either a derivation of *borra* (woolly), referring the plant's hairy leaves and stems, or a corruption of *corago*, which roughly translates to 'I bring the heart'.

Either way, for most of its history borage was known an anti-depressive, pleasure-giving plant across the Mediterranean region and Northern Europe. It was also a favourite additive for drinks – partly for its cucumber-like flavour but also, perhaps, to boost the effect of alcohol. A type of medieval tipple called 'cool tankard' was given an extra hit with the leaves and flowers of borage, while an old wives' tale suggested that if a woman slipped some borage into her lover's drink it would give him the impetus to propose. Even Charles Dickens enjoyed serving a borage-laced punch to get his guests in the mood; called 'cider cup', his potent brew contained cider, sherry, brandy and borage.

Forg\?t-111\?-11ot

A little cloud of blue
cameout And settled on the
sod
The one cried 'Oh Forget-Me-Not'
One bowed and murmured 'God'

ELLA HIGGINSON: *A FOREST ORCHID AND OTHER STORIES* (1897)

In 1508, while Michelangelo was putting the first few brushstrokes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, a young German painter was adding the finishing touches on his own masterpiece. The painting – *Girl Making a Garland* – by Hans Süss von Kulmbach is a charming, lovingly rendered picture of a girl, sitting on a windowsill, making a floral garland for her sweetheart. The gesture is one of a lover's promise, to bind her heart forever to another. Crucially, the flowers she uses are forget-me-nots, *the* plant of faithful love and remembrance.

Quite when forget-me-nots became the flower of commitment and memory, no one really knows. Interestingly, most European countries also call the flower forget-me-nots – in German *Vergißmeinnicht,* Swedish *förgätmigej*, Hungarian *nefelejcs,* Italian *non ti scordar di me* and Czech *nezabudka.* By the time Kulmbach was painting his picture, at the beginning of the 1500s, the symbolic meaning of the flower was already well established. One thought is that Henry IV, whose favourite bloom was the forget-me-not, turned the flower into a personal emblem of loyalty and remembrance while he was in exile. The flower often appears on Henry IV's clothing and royal collars; his signature phrase '*souveyne vous de moi*' (remember me).

There are, however, a number of different tales surrounding the naming of the flower and its association with feelings of longing. A Victorian poem – 'The Knight and the Fair Lady' – insists the flower is named after a romantic gesture that went horribly wrong; a knight, attempting to pick blue flowers from a riverside for his love, falls in the water. As he drowns, he tosses the flowers to safety – '*Lady, I'm gone, thine own true-knight – Forget me not!*'. There is also a Christian legend in which, when God is naming all the plants in the Garden of Eden, he overlooks a tiny blue one. The flower calls out 'Forget-me-not, O Lord' and the name stuck. Forget-me-nots were also a favourite flower in medieval cloisters or 'Mary gardens' as they were known, each plant chosen for its religious significance. Forget-me-nots, with their piercing blue petals, were known as 'Blue-Eyed Mary' or 'Eyes of Mary'.

Ed\?IW\?iss

Oh,had I the wings, the fleet wings of
adove I'd scale thehigh mountains, I'd fly to
my love

JOHN BOLLES: *THE EDELWEISS APOEM* (1881)

Think of the edelweiss and you think of the mountains. The flower has become the national symbol of Switzerland, a popular motif of the Alps, and a plant associated with the purity and inaccessibility of the highest peaks, as immortalised in the film *The Sound of Music*. Most of the legends and symbolism we attach to the edelweiss are, however, fairly modern and date from the second half of the 19th century. During this time, mountaineering became a fashionable pastime for the wealthy, especially amongst British high society. The edelweiss was thought to grow only in the most remote, snow-capped areas, and so wearing a sprig in your hat or buttonhole showed that you had dared to climb the most challenging peaks and survived to tell the tale.

The flower, when picked, also kept well and it was thought that if you brought back a posy of edelweiss for your loved one, it showed the ultimate devotion. Exaggerated stories of brave young men, falling to their deaths while climbing for edelweiss, only cemented the symbolism (although there was a famous incident when, as a child, Ludwig II of Bavaria watched his tutor, Baron Wuffen, attempt to climb and pick edelweiss for Ludwig's mother, only to see him fall and sustain catastrophic injuries).

For most of its life, edelweiss had little to do with mountaineering. Early names for it included *Wollblume* (wool flower) and *cotonnière des Alpes* (cotton of the Alps), referring to its white, hairy appearance. Other names – *Étoile des Alpes* in French and *Stella Alpina* in Italian – translate to 'Star of the Alps' and refer to its pointed, dazzlingly white petals. It was often used as a folk medicine for stomach complaints; one, now defunct, German name for the flower, *Bauchwehbleaml*, literally translates to 'flower of the belly ache'. The earliest drawing that exists of the edelweiss comes from the early 15th-century *Codex Bellunensis*, a sumptuously illustrated book of medicinal plants from Italy. The work is essentially a medieval rewrite of *De Materia Medica* by the ancient Greek physician Dioscorides, but the author included local plants used by north-east Italian herb-gatherers for cures. Edelweiss – the herb for abdominal pain – is there in all its glory.

Lady's Mantle

Venus claims the herb as her own.

NICHOLAS CULPEPER: *THE ENGLISH PHYSITIAN* (1652–3)

Lady's mantle is also called *Alchemilla*; ancient alchemists thought the dew drops on lady's mantle leaves were magical and the only water pure enough to turn base metal into gold. Its common name emerged during the Middle Ages, when the plant became synonymous with the Virgin Mary. The scalloped leaves were thought to resemble the hem of Mary's cloak or 'mantle', hence the punctuation Lady's Mantle, not Ladies' Mantle. In German the plant is known as *Frauenmantel,* in Italian *Madonna Mantello* or 'Madonna's Cloak'.

Lady's mantle has long been a flower associated with women and reproductive health. It has been used for centuries as a traditional remedy for many female ailments. While many of the remedies have their basis in the plant's actual medicinal properties, some of its more outlandish 'cures' relied on the plant's association with spiritual purity and the female body – in the Middle Ages lady's mantle was '*a thousand times sold*' as a way for women to tighten their genitalia and appear to be virgins, according to medieval physician Andres Laguna.

In the 17th century Nicholas Culpeper suggested taking lady's mantle for '*such women as have large breasts, causing them to grow less and hard*'. Even as late as the early 1900s, the flower was in great demand for its '*power of restoring feminine beauty, however faded, to its early freshness*', according to the Edwardian writer Reverend Thomas Firminger Thiselton-Dyer in his book *Folk-Lore of Women*.

The crystal-like morning dew that collects in lady's mantle leaves wasn't just revered by alchemists. Folk healers from across Europe would collect dew drops to mix into potions – often for love or good health. In Northern Italy, until early in the 20th century, lady's mantle was picked at first light to give as a love token. In both Ireland and Scotland dew drops and the juice of lady's mantle leaves were used as a cure for the 'evil eye' or fairy bewitchment.

Chamomile

...the camomill, the more it is troden, the sweeter smell it yeildeth.

ROBERT GREENE: *PHILOMELA* (1592)

Chamomile has been a busy plant over the centuries. From being used as a grisly Egyptian embalming herb and remedy for malaria, to a calming bedtime drink for Peter Rabbit, chamomile has had more uses than perhaps any other herb or flower in the world.

The name is a little confusing; there are actually two different varieties that are often confused – Roman chamomile (also known as 'true' or English chamomile or *Anthemis nobilis*) and German chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*). Both, however, have similar properties, including smelling slightly apple-like, which gave the plant its name – chamomile comes from the Greek *chamaímēlon*, an aggregation of *chamaí* (on the ground) and *melon* (apple).

The *Old English Herbarium*, written around 1000 AD, recommends '*For eye pain let the person pick the plant called camemelon or camomile before sunrise. When picking it, the person should say he is picking it for white specks in the eye and for eye pain. Then take the juice and apply it to the eyes.*' Talking patiently to the plant, as you were gathering it, was seen as a mark of respect amongst herbalists and physicians. In 1606, Flemish physician Rembert Dodoens, in his *Ram's Little Dodeon*, recommends: '*To comfort the brain smell camomile, eat sage, wash measurably, sleep reasonably, delight to hear melody and singing.*'

Nowadays, most people use chamomile as a soothing sleep remedy, but for much of its history it was the go-to herb for women's ailments and

pregnancy. The name *Matricaria* in German chamomile's Latin name comes from *mater* meaning 'mother' or 'womb', an allusion to the plant's powers against female ills. While in Norway, chamomile was traditionally a midwives' cure, used to treat everything from labour pains to post-natal depression. It's telling that the Anglo-Saxons called the wonder herb *magepe* – the word also meaning female, mother or wife.

Lily of the valley

No flower amid the garden fairer grows
Than the sweet lily of the lowly vale,
The queen of flowers

JOHN KEATS: *ENDYMION* (1818)

Once upon a time there was a holy man called St Leonard. He lived deep in a forest, as a hermit, but had to share the woods with a terrible dragon called Temptation. The pair fought constantly and, although St Leonard managed to drive the monstrous beast away, he was badly injured. Wherever St Leonard's blood fell to the ground, lily of the valley flowers mysteriously grew.

This ancient legend is one that has delighted both French and English children throughout the centuries. In the French version, the dragon lived in the Vienne Valley; in the English tale, the battleground was St Leonard's Forest, Sussex (an area in the forest is still known as 'The Lily Beds'). St Leonard was, in fact, a real person and established a monastery near Limoges in the 6th century. The abbey became a destination for pilgrims, including Richard the Lionheart, who perhaps spread tales of the saint's good deeds into southern England on his return. The flower is also known as 'Our Lady's Tears' or 'Mary's Tears', from the idea that the flowers sprang up as Mary wept at Jesus' crucifixion. In medieval times the flower was known as 'liriconfancy', possibly a corruption of the Latin *lilium convallium* (literally 'lily of the valley') and, thanks to its association with the Virgin Mary, became a symbol of maidenly virtue.

Folk names include May bells and mayflowers – their spring appearance a symbol of a return of happiness. Another rural name was 'muggets'; the

Italians call them *mughetto,* the French *muguet* – a common link to an older word *muge*, meaning musk or heady scent. The French still celebrate May Day as the *Fête du Muguet.* In the mid 16th century, King Charles IX was said to have been given lily of the valley as a lucky charm. He was so enamoured with the perfumed posy he decided to give the flower to all the court's ladies, and French people continue to give lily of the valley to family or friends as a token of luck. Germans do the same with their *Maiglöckchen* (Little May bells) on Whit Monday. Lily of the valley is Finland's national flower and their name for it – *kielo* – means 'tongue', after the shape of the leaves.

Perhaps the most unusual name for lily of the valley is 'glovewort'. In the fabulously named *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*, the Victorian Reverend Oswald Cockayne described an ancient balm which might explain the name: '*For sore of hands, take this same wort…pound it with old lard without salt, add there to a cup of old wine, and let that be heated without smoke…knock together in the manner in which thou mightest worka plaister, andlay to the hand.*' This sounds a more promising lily of the valley treatment than the one prescribed by John Gerard in 1597 for a form of arthritis: '*a Glasse being filled with the flowers…and set in an Ant Hill with the mouth close stopped for a month's space and then taken out, ye shall finda liquor in the glasse which being outwardly applied helps the gout very much.*'

Yarrow

Good night,fair yarrow,
Thricegood nighttothee;
Ihope before tomorrow's dawn
My true love I shall see.

ANON: *FOLK·LORERECORD* (1887)

The Latin name for yarrow is *Achillea millefolium*. During the Trojan War, the Greek hero Achilles was said to have been instructed by Chiron, the wisest of all the centaurs, on how to treat soldiers' injuries with yarrow. Yarrow's proficiency as a styptic for battle injuries (something that can help stop blood flowing from a wound) led to an outpouring of alternate names – bloodwort, *herba militaris*, knight's milefoil, nosebleed, sanguinary, soldier's woundwort and staunchweed. Another name 'carpenter's weed' (*herbe aux charpentiers* in French) came from its ability to heal deep cuts from sharp tools. When regular medicines were in short supply during the US Civil War and the First World War, yarrow came to the rescue, while a recent archaeological discovery even found evidence of a Neanderthal man chewing yarrow for a painful abscess 50,000 years ago. Yarrow is one of the herbs most commonly used for medicinal purposes by Native Americans, with the leaves used as a coagulant for wounds and pushed up the nostril to stem bleeding.

Yarrow's other great 'power' was its ability to confer second sight, especially when it came to matters of the heart. Love divinations involved picking yarrow at either a significant place or time (such as a young man's grave or during a New Moon) and placing it under your pillow; during the night you will dream of your future true love. A slightly different version involved ticking your nostril with a yarrow leaf – if it caused a nosebleed your lover did indeed really love you; if not, their love was false. Far from being idle beliefs, such love divinations and herbs of prediction were taken very seriously indeed, especially during medieval times. During the hysteria of the witchcraft trials of the early 17th century, women caught using herbs such as yarrow faced charges of using evil magic. Interrogators managed to extract a confession from one woman, Elspeth Reoch, of Orkney, who confessed to using 'Merefow' (an Old English corruption of *millefolium*) to '*causis the nose bleid*'. Reoch was found guilty of being a witch and sentenced to death.

FLOWERS TO SAY GET WELL SOON

Chamomile
Lavender
Yarrow
Echinacea
Lady's Mantle

While tending to her wounded soldiers, Florence Nightingale famously wrote 'I shall never forget the rapture of fever patients over a bunch of bright-coloured flowers.' Instinctively we know that flowers make us feel better and, in recent years, science has borne this out.

Plants are hugely healing – studies have shown that people in hospital beds which look out onto green spaces recover faster and with less pain relief than other patients, while other research indicates that being surrounded by flowers reduces stress and improves mood.

Since Roman times, gardens have been used as both practical and therapeutic spaces, an idea carried on into medieval monastic potagers and Catholic 'Mary Gardens'. Certain plants such as chamomile, lavender and lady's mantle provided both colour and cures for centuries; in a world where epidemiology and evidence-based medicine were a distant dream, flowers could offer a patient both comfort and, with any luck, a fighting chance.

Lily

His cheeks are like beds of spices planted by perfumers;
his lips are lilies, dripping finest myrrh.

SONG OF SOLOMON 5:13

In the Bible's 'Song of Solomon', when Jesus' mouth is compared to a lily, it seems a strange metaphor to choose. While modern commentators often assume the lilies in the biblical text are pink or red, the analogy actually works better if we get inside the mind of the ancient writer. Since before the time of the Old Testament, the lily has been a symbol of purity. The Ancient Greeks and Romans spoke most often of the *Lilium candidum*, its spectacular, bleached whiteness the perfect representation of moral cleanliness. Propertius, a poet writing decades before the death of Christ, was already using phrases such as '*lilies are not more white than my lady*' and talking of virgin's baskets filled with '*shining lilies*'. Jesus' lips being compared to lilies, therefore, may have originally meant his words were pure and free from deceit.

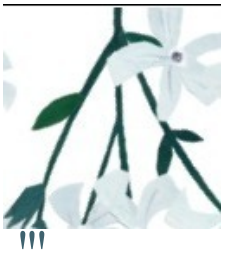
Purity was also a characteristic attributed to the Virgin Mary. White lilies make a regular appearance in early paintings of the Annunciation and refer to Mary's virginity. Christian painters and writers from the early medieval period onwards used the lily as a way of interpreting their religious beliefs – the 8th-century Benedictine monk and scholar, the Venerable Bede, for example, compares the Virgin Mary to a white lily, the petals symbolising her untouched body. In the medieval world, virginity and ideas about beauty were inseparable. In the 14th century Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, writes of St Cecilia:

Symbol of pure and virgin chastity;

Or, since she had the white of modesty,
And green of good conscience, and of good fame
The savour sweet, so lily was her name.

In Shakespeare's plays, the lily is often used to describe the delicate beauty or perfection of his heroines. Lines such as '*How bravely thou becomest thy bed, fresh lily, And whiter than the sheets! That I might touch! But kiss; one kiss!*' (*Cymbeline*, Act II, Scene 2) hint at virginity but also reflect the Tudor and Elizabethan obsession with porcelain-white skin; ceruse, which was made from toxic white lead, vinegar and water, was a skin cream used to artificially whiten the face (suntanned skin, by contrast, marked you out as peasantry). Another Elizabethan phrase – *lily-livered* – is also an interesting one to unpick. Physicians from this period believed that the liver, not the brain, controlled our emotions; a pale, poorly functioning liver would therefore cause a patient to be mentally weak or cowardly. In one of the greatest insults ever committed to paper, in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606), Kent blasts Oswald, calling him:

…a lily-livered, action-taking knave, a whoreson,
glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue;
one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a
bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but
the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar,
and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch…



Jas111i11

The image of love,that nightly flies
To visit thebashful maid;
Steals from the Jasmine flower, that
sighs Its soul,like her,in the shade.

THOMAS MOORE: *LALLA ROOKH: THE LIGHTOFTHE HARAM* (1817)

Few flowers are as intoxicating as the jasmine. With its starry white flowers and heady scent, it has been a favourite amongst gardeners and perfumiers for centuries. The name 'jasmine' comes from the Persian word *yāsaman*, where it has long been cultivated, but the precise location of its Eurasian origins are a puzzle.

Jasmine made the transition to European gardens sometime in the Middle Ages. In *The Decameron*, a fruity collection of stories by 14th-century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio, he describes a Florentine walled garden filled with scented plants and romantic pathways: '*The sides of these walks were almost closed in with jasmine and red and white roses so that it was possible to be walking in the garden in a perfumed and delicious shade.*' Strong scent and romantic intention seem to go hand in hand – Boccaccio also describes an erotic scene in vivid detail where lovers are sprinkled with jasmine water before making love; for the hero, the wait is almost unbearable: '*To Salabaetto'twas as if he were in Paradise; a thousand times he scanned the lady, who was indeed most beautiful; and he counted each hour as a hundred years until the slaves should get them gone, and he find himself in the lady's arms.*'

In another Italian tale, Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, was said to have introduced a rare species of jasmine to his garden in the late 1600s. He was, so the story goes, deeply possessive of his treasured jasmine and forbade his gardener to take any cuttings from it. The gardener, however, was in love and, in a moment of hubris, snipped off a small sprig of the plant to give to his betrothed. She loved the flower and planted it in her own garden, where it thrived. Soon she was able to take cuttings of her own, which she sold at market in Florence for a good price. Thanks to that one original cutting, the gardener's fiancée raised enough money to wed her intended and they both lived happily ever after.

Whether the story is true or not, Cosimo had an even more mysterious connection with the jasmine flower. During his reign he had developed a secret recipe for chocolate that became a great success and was sent to other European courts as a very special gift. People clamoured for a bite of the decadent, delicately perfumed chocolate but couldn't work out what made it

so delicious; when Cosimo died, the recipe finally became public. The secret ingredient? Jasmine flower.

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